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## Freshman Student Perception of Institutional Engagement Strategies

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7-2017

# Freshman Student Perception of Institutional Engagement Strategies

Donald J. Comi

*Concordia University - Portland*

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Concordia University (Portland)

College of Education

Doctorate of Education Program

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Freshman Student Perceptions of Institutional Engagement Strategies

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Concordia University – Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in

Higher Education

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Concordia University Portland

2017

## **Abstract**

Technology, socio-economic disparities, and an increasingly diverse population base have changed the nature of American communities and thus the educational and occupational landscape. Access to higher education is functionally the gatekeeper for technical and professional careers. The gap between the number of students starting a four-year degree and the number completing a degree is discouraging. As a student transitions to college, many factors influence personal resiliency. Familial support, pre-college preparation, peer-to-peer relationships, and institutional connection all influence a student's resiliency. However, higher education's traditional engagement and transitional programming does not always engender connection nor promote academic success. This qualitative case study explored student perceptions of institutional engagement, to understand how students perceive institutional engagement and why institution-to-student connection is an important influence to student resiliency. Stratified purposive sampling ensured that the study included diverse voices from the freshman class to include, UREP, White, first generation, and academically struggling students. 11 open interviews provided data for investigating the freshman perception of the transitional experience. Results revealed in depth understanding of institution-to-student connection and potential sources of divisiveness, as revealed in freshman perceptions. Recommendations are provided for potential high leverage practices that may serve to recruit, connect, and retain students across racial/ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, and gender divides.

*Keywords:* case study, connection, diversity, first generation students, inclusion, institutional engagement, interview, multicultural engagement, orientation, qualitative, retention, stratified purposive sampling, student perspective, resiliency, urep students.

## **Dedication**

Two weeks after I started the journey toward my doctorate, my wife Susan, was diagnosed with Breast Cancer. Without missing a beat, she encouraged me to stay course, not knowing where her journey would take us. Susan is the most optimistic and strongest woman I know, I am eternally grateful for her love and support over the past 32 years, but especially through this process. She told me that God has presented us with this opportunity and that we best listen and step forward in faith. Fast forward three and a half years, God has proven faithful. Susan is cancer free, and I have completed this dissertation, thanks in no small part to a profound faith that God will provide. This work is evidence that God is faithful to bring to completion that which He has begun. I dedicate this work to Susan, my love and my inspiration.

## **Acknowledgments**

As much as this is my own work, I would not have been able to complete it without the support of a great many people. All the faculty at Concordia Portland that served me through the first two years built the foundation upon which this work stands. My editor John Carter, your efforts brought my work to life. Jennifer Von Behren, my transcriptionist, your detailed and meticulous work helped me “listen” well. Thanks to my dissertation committee, Dr. Heather Miller and Dr. Dana Shelton, your encouragement and especially the tough questions you asked early in the process set me on a path to success. A final thanks to Dr. Jillian Skelton, your mentorship, tough questions, and availability kept me on the path, and served as an excellent example of what I hope to become as a mentor and leader in academia.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Background**

Technology, socio-economic disparities, and an increasingly diverse population base have changed the nature of American communities and thus the educational and occupational landscape. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2016), the number of jobs requiring a bachelor degree as a minimum will rise from 5% to 25% by 2024. In that same time opportunities for those with only a high school only diploma will decline. Access to degree producing higher education is functionally the gatekeeper for technical and professional careers. Therefore, it is appropriate to define an equitable education system as one that allows all people access to education from preschool years to completion of a bachelor's degree, perhaps even beyond. For over 50 years, elementary and secondary education has been a priority at both federal and state levels. The United States government's efforts are chronicled in a series of legislative actions, from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to the No Child Left Behind Act and on to the Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA) enacted in 2016. The ultimate goal for ESSA is college and career readiness. Fifty-one years of concerted efforts have led to a modest increase in educational indicators; most notably, enrollment rates in two and four-year institutions are up by over 17% since the 1970s (NCES, 2015). However, while a 17% change in college enrollment appears to indicate significant growth, the six-year completion rate for those seeking a bachelor's degree has remained essentially stagnant and is still only 59.4% (NCES, 2015).

Following the revolutionary war, leaders of the new republic recognized the need for an educated citizenry and set forth to develop higher education within America. The purpose of

higher education in America has been controversial ever since. There appear to be three major reasons for higher education, each one begetting specific educational system characteristics:

- Liberal Arts; Exemplifies the innate value of education, fulfills the social edict to educate for the purposes of participation in community.
- Professional; Exemplifies the need for higher education to be able to be successful at certain careers, such as medicine, teaching, and engineering, fulfills both economic and social need for an educated work force.
- Research; Exemplifies the value of growing the knowledge base, fulfills the social need to understand and improve life (Farish, 2016).

Regardless of one's educational philosophy, the gap between the number of students starting a four-year degree and the number completing a degree is discouraging. As a student transitions to college, many factors influence personal resiliency. Students bring some of those factors with them to college such as academic preparation, maturity, internal motivations, familial support, and cultural background, along with personal expectations. Other factors pertain to the transitional experience itself: connection, institutional-fit, faculty-to-student and student-to-student relationships, initial academic successes, and socio-cultural transitional stress. Institutions wield influence within a select few of these areas, institutional-fit, connection, and initial academic success. It is within these areas that institutional engagement strategies appear to be positively correlated with resiliency (Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011; Turner, 2016; Turner & Thompson, 2014).

Researchers have demonstrated that students' connection to their institution is one important factor that contributes to retention and improved GPA (Aquino, 2011; Clark & Cundiff, 2009; Kiser & Price, 2008; Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Pike et al., 2011; Turner, 2016;



Turner & Thompson, 2014). Higher educational institutions have recognized that institutional engagement strategies play a role in creating community and influencing connection, yet graduation rates have remained mostly stagnant over the past 50 years (Furr & Elling, 2002; Kiser & Price, 2008; NCES, 2015; Permzadian & Credé, 2015). The stagnant graduation rates indicate that higher education's traditional engagement and transitional programming may not create connection or promote academic resiliency. Furthermore, institutional transition programs (traditions, engagement strategies, success programs, and school culture) may diminish student engagement or perhaps, create a divisive or unwelcoming perception in the minds of traditional freshmen (Duggan & Williams, 2010; Hickinbottom-Braun & Burns, 2015; Permzadian & Credé, 2015). Deeper analysis of the transitional experience would be valuable, and qualitative methods may illuminate the freshman transitional experience, thereby filling a gap that previous studies have not addressed (Aruguete & Hardy, 2016; Dika & D'Amico, 2015; Moreira & Telzer, 2015; Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Turner, 2016).

### **Significance of Research**

One must deeply explore the phenomena in order to understand a lived experience. According to Yin (2016) case study is an appropriate method for answering descriptive, qualitative questions about phenomena. The results of this study enhanced higher educational leadership's understanding of how students experience institutional engagement and why connection (institutional fit) plays a role in supporting student resiliency. Open interviews allowed students to express perceptions of engagements that were particularly influential. Students shared significant experiences, both positive and negative, thus painting a vibrant picture of the transitional experience.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Students drop out of higher education for a variety of reasons, many of which are unrelated to institutional influence. Nonetheless, one significant factor in students' resiliency is their perceived connection to peers and to their institution (D'Lima, Winsler, & Kitsantas, 2014; Turner, 2016). Connection is a factor within the span of institutional influence. The problem is that institutions do not know the effect of students' perception of institutional engagement strategies, the role engagement strategies play in building connection, nor the actual role connection plays on a student's resiliency or resolve to persist in higher education. Therefore, investigating the transitional experience more thoroughly is necessary to discover the sources of connection and the role that connection plays in a student's resiliency.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory, embedded, single-case study, conducted at a mid-sized private university in the Pacific Northwest, was to understand how freshmen perceive institutional engagement strategies. Specifically, to unpack why connection (institutional fit) plays a role in supporting freshman student resiliency. The study identified why some students perceive institutional engagement strategies as connective while others view the same strategies as divisive. Higher education institutional leaders may use the results to gain a better understanding of the actual effect of engagement and transitional strategies.

## **Research Questions**

- RQ 1: How do freshmen students perceive institutional engagement strategies?
- RQ 2: Why does connection (institutional fit) play a role in a student's resolve to persist in higher education?

## **Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study**

In higher education, students are both a product and a resource. Schools have an ethical obligation to provide an opportunity for students to prosper and develop, to provide the most productive educational experience possible, and ultimately, to produce graduates that will be positive contributors to society. Certainly, instructional expertise, student engagement with content, and class size, play large roles in individual academic success. However, focusing solely on the classroom without considering the rest of the university community would demonstrate an isolated and incomplete view of a student's functional network, and serve to diminish an institution's span of influence. If higher education views a lack of student resiliency as solely the student's problem, then there is little hope for improvement. It would be the functional equivalent of a coach that does not coach. If a coach recruited players and built a team based on talent and past performance, then simply allowed the team compete based on the pre-existing set of skills; that team would likely not perform well. Here in America we would not tolerate such a laissez-faire coach. This practice in higher education would squander valuable resources and limit production. Institutional engagement and support, coaching, is vital for creating opportunities that lead to individual success for students who otherwise might just fade into the background and eventually dropout.

Moreover, the external support that institutional mentors and peers offer can be a positive influence on the students' transformation and thus the transition to a healthy and successful college experience (Baber, 2012; Turner & Thompson, 2014). Authentic relationships contribute to students' resiliency, influencing intent to persist as well as grit or one's ability to overcome failure (Lenz, Holman, Lancaster, & Gotay, 2013). Students are successful if they develop resiliency while strengthening their academic and social skills. Turner and Thompson

(2014) identified four factors that contribute to freshman success, freshmen-focused activities, developing effective study skills, institution/instructor-student relationship, and academic support. An authentic instructor-to-student relationship and freshman-focused activities have the most significant effect on freshmen's success (Lenz et al., 2013; Turner, 2016).

Focusing on institution/instructor-to-student relationships and freshmen focused activities, there are five categories that serve to provide context for institutional engagement. With the four components of the conceptual framework in mind, each category provides a unique contribution to the understanding of freshman resiliency, academic growth, and social connection:

- Connection and living networks
- Generational attributes
- Institutional engagement strategies
- Grit, motivation, and resiliency
- Cultural consideration

The above categories serve to describe the intersections of potential institutional influence and a student's intent to persist. The conceptual framework provides the boundaries for analyzing and understanding freshman persistence through the analysis of literature germane to the aforementioned categories. This study will focus on the lived experience of the transition from high school to college.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Connection.** This term is defined as invisible ties that serve to connect individuals to institutions or to other individuals within the community.

**Engagement strategies.** This term is defined as purposeful institutional efforts designed to foster community and offer academic, social, emotional, or spiritual support to students.

**Institutional fit.** This term is defined as the quality of a student being academically qualified and sharing a common purpose with the institution.

**Resiliency.** This term is defined as a student's resolve to persist through challenges and roadblocks.

**InitiTradition.** This term is defined as student led, university supported tradition consisting of competition and activities that serves as a freshman initiation without hazing.

**Transitional year.** This term is defined as the time period of approximately one year that starts at acceptance and ends with the completion of the first semester of one's college experience.

### **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

The population of the United States, and therefore colleges, is growing more diverse (Manago et al., 2012). Nationally, between 2000 and 2014, the percentage of Black college students rose from 11.7 to 14.5% and Hispanic students rose from 9.9 to 16.5% (NCES, 2015). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that each subsequent freshman class will be more diverse than that of previous years. The data presented in Figure 1 represents the demographic composition of University XYZ at the beginning of this research. Researchers have determined that perspectives of students within racial/ethnic minority groups differ from those of the dominate population within a given setting (D'Lima et al., 2014; Duggan & Williams, 2011; Rigali-Oiler, & Kurpius, 2013; Tuner & Thompson, 2014). Additionally, the perspectives of highly successful students differ from those of struggling students (D'Lima et al., 2014). That leads me to be interested in the perspective of three composite sub groups:

- Students self-identified as belonging to an ethnic or racial minority group
- Students that have self-identified as being non-Christian

- Students that are on academic watch list

Stratified purposive sampling, is an appropriate technique for providing voice to homogenous sub-groups within a population, this is especially true when the sample size is small (Babbie, 2013; Patton, 2000; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

University XYZ has historically been a predominately White institution. Recognizing diversity as an asset, University XYZ has adopted a strategic goal of increasing the diversity of the student population by 2021. Institutional data reveals that from 2010 to 2015, the percentage of ethnic/racial diversity for undergraduates has grown from 5% to 25% of the student body. Additionally, the persistence rate for University XYW, has remained relatively constant since 2006; approximately 85% of freshmen persist to sophomore year and 75% of Freshmen persist to graduate within 6 years. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), University XYZ's persistence rates are comparable to other medium sized private universities.

Table 1

*University XYZ: 10th Day Enrollment Report, Spring 2016 Used with permission*

Demographic Category	Fall 2015	Fall 2016	Change
American/Alaskan Native	16	14	-2
Asian	107	112	5
Black, African American	48	45	-3
Hawaiian/Pacific Island	7	6	-1
Hispanic/Latino	183	204	21
Two or more races	146	156	10
Unknown	29	23	-6
White/Non-Hispanic	1734	1651	-83
International	50	69	19

Although White students make up the preponderance of University XYZ's campus culture, the growing diversity has highlighted the need to explore institutional engagement

through the lenses of varied and diverse perspectives. The researcher will conduct this study with the assumption that traditions and programs were built first for the dominate culture of the university. However, as university goals and student demographics have changed over time, traditions and programs have evolved. While some of these evolved programs have included new demographic groups successfully, other programs have fallen short of including various student groups. The researcher will not conduct this study with the goals of developing a comprehensive theory on student success; rather, the purpose is to deepen understanding of why institutional efforts foster connection and embolden a student's resiliency. Results, while potentially transferable to other similar institutions, are not necessarily generalizable across all institutions.

## **Summary**

The results of this study serve to enhance institutional understanding of the freshman journey and help to resolve disconnects between institutional intent and the actual effect on a student's perception. The following chapters highlight research efforts over the past 40 years, with an emphasis on current research relevant to freshman success and retention. Methodology of past research efforts is then discussed and critiqued. Ultimately the researcher establishes a justification for the methodology chosen for the study. This study's results will highlight how students experience the freshman transition and serve to fill the gap in institutional understanding of why connection plays a role in supporting student resiliency. Institutions of higher education will be able to use these results to develop a better understanding of the actual effect of engagement and transitional strategies.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this embedded case study was to explore the freshman transitional experience through the eyes of freshmen themselves. Each student perceives engagements and experiences from the unique perspective of his or her own lens. Past and present experiences contrive to orchestrate the symphony of the freshman transition. The case study used open interviews to explore each participant's story.

Chapter 2 includes background history of higher education, a discussion of the purpose and some challenges facing current leaders. Chapter 2 also includes information on the literature that provided the foundation for the study. Research processes, key word searches, sources of articles, research documents, and journals are incorporated. Literature identified in Chapter 2 served to establish the conceptual framework for the study.

### **Title Searches and Resources**

Construction of this literature review involved a comprehensive electronic search effort, exploring peer reviewed journals, published works, and web based media. In depth reading of over 220 documents coupled with personal communications with freshman transition teams formed the foundation of this researcher's initial understanding. 220 documents were reviewed, 65 were selected to form the basis for this literature review. 10% of the literature informed the qualitative research design, data collection, and data analysis. 58 documents directly informed the study, 57% of this literature was published in 2012 or later. The remainder of the literature was retained to add background and understanding of continuous and persistent challenges identified in the 1980s and 1990s that remain to today.



Research began with keyword searches in two primary library databases: ERIC, ProQuest. Taylor and Francis and Wiley Online provided a conduit to peer review journals. Initial key word list included college, connection, education, engagement, first, freshman, generation, grit, higher, institutional, millennial, orientation, retention, resiliency, success, university. Boolean strategies were used to construct searches with combinations of the key words. Each search brought about new ideas and connections that led deeper into the available literature. Resource lists led to primary sources cited within literature. Paths of exploration expanded with each document reviewed. This process was iterative and carried out over approximately 18 months.

### **Historical Context of Higher Education**

Institutions and scholars invest time and money implementing institutional engagement strategies for students transitioning to college. It appears that GPA and retention are correlated with engagement strategies, therefore many researchers use the external measures of GPA and retention to identify successful strategies (Aquino, 2011; Clark & Cundiff, 2009; Furr & Elling, 2002; Kiser & Price, 2008; Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011; Tinto, 1975, 1987; Turner, 2016; Turner & Thompson, 2014; Vergara, 2012). Researchers conclude that all students go through transitional stress (Moreira & Telzer, 2015). Some demographic groups are more vulnerable than others (Duggan & Williams, 2011). Turner (2016) highlighted that young men in particular struggle to persist in the university setting. Aruguete and Hardy (2016) stated Black, male students at a predominately White institution are more likely to lack necessary resiliency to persist, than their White peers. Greater numbers of underrepresented (UREP) minority students are attending college. Dika and D'Amico (2016) stated that UREP minority students face “unique and persistent challenges” in undergraduate education (p. 369).

Carlson (2016) highlighted that millennial students in 2016, both male and female, tend to lack the quality of resiliency or grit. D’Lima, Winsler, and Kistansas (2014) described a student’s lack of persistence through the lens of self-efficacy. Aruguete and Hardy (2016) stated that some students feel their attributes are fixed and therefore that they have no individual control over their own educational outcomes, thus leading to academic paralysis. Permzadian and Credé (2015) identified three determinants that fuel student success and provide touch points for institutional engagement: “declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, and motivation” (p. 283).

The transition to college is an exciting yet stressful time in the life of an adolescent. According to Moreira and Telzer (2015), distance, coupled with, college enculturation can strain familial and peer relationships; this can add depression to the list of concerns for college freshmen. Transition also brings challenges of time management, distraction, desire to connect, and new academic expectations into this *mélange*. “It is, therefore, essential for researchers to examine the early motivational profiles of ethnically diverse, first-year college students as such profiles may be related to student performance, retention, and eventual completion of college” (Aruguete & Hardy, 2016, p. 341). Aruguete and Hardy’s research indicates millennial students are inclined to possess a sense of hopelessness, academic success is beyond their control, thus they are prone to give up when faced with failure. Students, predisposed to giving up when faced with failure, will likely have a unique perception of the transition experience. According to Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski, (2011), students tend to attribute failure to an external source, indicating a student belief that success is beyond the individual’s control. External factors become the cause of a student’s academic failure; students blame poor instructor practices, poor or incomplete advising, or university policies for failure. (Dimetriou & Schmitz-

Sciborski, 2011). Internal attitudes and attributes that students bring with them to college are part of, but not the entire picture of a student. External influences on a student are also important to consider. A sense of belonging or institutional fit, then becomes as important as a student's college readiness.

Institutions with selective admissions policies put forth great efforts to ensure institutional fit, that is to match applicants to the institution. For example, Georgia Institute of Technology (GIT) Admissions (2016) employs a holistic admissions process, considering every element of a student's application packet, with the goal of determining student credentials and readiness for college as well as institutional fit. This example is one of many institutional efforts to select and admit a successful cohort. Once admitted, every student undergoes orientation and other transition focused engagements. Despite selective entrance processes and institutional engagement, many transitioning students still do not persist on to their second year or beyond. While not all students should attend a 4-year university immediately after high school, the concern arises when students that have successfully navigated a selective admissions process fail to persist. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2015), average persistence rates vary between 60% and 80 % depending on the type of higher educational institution. Additionally, less than 60% of matriculates at 4-year institutions complete a bachelor's degree within 6 years (NCES, 2015). Permzadian and Credé (2015) studied 1669 public institutions, they estimated a combined student-institutional cost of attrition at \$16.5 billion for, which equates to approximately \$13 million per public institution (Permzadian & Credé, 2015). It is reasonable to extrapolate this level of attrition cost to institutions of higher learning throughout the United States, both public and private. The \$16.5 billion does not take into consideration lost revenue on the part of the institution or potential lost life-time earning potential for the students.

A student's failure to persist to the second year and beyond is both an economic and ethical concern. This problem has a negative impact, both on students and institutions, because students that do not persist lose lifetime income potential and often have difficulty repaying student loans. Institutions also lose because the administrative cost to recruit, admit, register, and orient new students can be as much as 10 times the cost to retain students. Turner and Thompson (2014) identified two areas of institutional influence over student persistence: connection and academic success. Connection is multi-faceted and includes peer-to-peer and student-to-institution connection. Turner and Thompson state that most effective academic success strategies are those designed to improve student's study skills.

Institutional efforts to establish connections have led many higher-education institutions to offer first-year seminars (FYSs). Institutions employ FYSs to counter the trend of millennial students arriving on campus ill prepared for the rigors of higher education. Faculty of FYS sections work to create authentic relationships thereby creating an opportunity for both connection and academic skills intervention. Researchers who use retention rates and GPAs as measures of success have determined FYSs are beneficial for students (Aquino, 2011; Clark & Cundiff, 2009; Furr & Elling, 2002; Kiser & Price, 2008; Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011; Tinto, 1975, 1987; Turner, 2016; Turner & Thompson, 2014; Vergara, 2012). While FYS curriculum varies between schools, many FYS programs focus only on skills and study habits, effectively reducing the transitional engagement to what Hickinbottom-Braun and Burns (2015) call the "instrumental level" (p. 163). Instrumentalism is the tendency for higher-education institutions to provide the basic set of instruments to students so that they are successful and able to move easily into a career. This sort of cookbook approach hamstrings students, leaving them to believe that college success is simply about employing specific skills

and performing a set of behaviors. While having some short-term positive effects, the instrumental focus may be counter-productive. Hickinbottom-Braun and Burns (2015) maintained these market driven efforts are detrimental to both students and institution in the end. “If the goal of education is to produce educated citizens, then instrumentalism should play a much smaller role than it currently does” (Hickinbottom-Braun & Burns, 2015, p. 163). Therefore, institutions should focus greater attention on the broader purpose of higher education, not simply career preparation. Institutions invest significant financial resources in engagement programs, and researchers have identified correlations between some engagement strategies and GPA/retention (Aquino, 2011; Clark & Cundiff, 2009; Furr & Elling, 2002; Kiser & Price, 2008; Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011; Tinto, 1975, 1987; Turner, 2016; Turner & Thompson, 2014; Vergara, 2012). Permzadian and Credé’s (2015) work revealed a small connection between FYSS and GPA and first year retention. Institutions and researchers do not know how students perceive institutional engagement strategies, the role engagement strategies play in building connection, nor the actual role connection plays on a student’s resolve to persist in higher education.

Millennial students do not experience connection to an institution in the same way as past generations. Castro (2010) reported that authentic connection to social justice and community inspires millennial students in a way that was not present in Generation X. Institutional engagement strategies and campus culture influence peer-to-peer connections, lead to a positive sense of community and foster strong student-to-institution connections. Both types of connections contribute to student resilience and persistence (Turner & Thompson, 2014). Christakis and Fowler’s (2009) work demonstrated that people live in networks and that those networks exert influence. Therefore, students do not exist simply as individuals, but in a greater

context as part of a campus network. Bridging relationships hold these networks together. A student's network is not limited to the campus alone; rather, a student brings with them the network of the past via virtual social connections that serve to strengthen geographically strained bonds (Manago, Taylor & Greenfield, 2012; Moreira & Telzer, 2015). Spady (1971) identified the burden and blessing of past relationships that persist into higher education; he placed these relationships in the category of "normative congruence" (p. 39). It is in the context of the student's living network of influence that institutions engage students and work to build student-to-institution bonds as well as student-to-student bonds. According to Turner (2016) both formal interventions and informal interactions can foster connection and have an influence on a student's perception of student-to-institution fit. However, there is a possibility that strategies designed to encourage connection actually create an unsafe or unwelcoming perception in some students, thereby fostering discord and a widening separation. If colleges desire to leverage the positive effects of connected networks to influence freshman success, then there is a need to acquire a deep understanding of how students perceive connection, whether student-to-student, student-to-instructor, or student-to-institution.

The literature review starts with a discussion of the conceptual framework through which I will explore student perception in this study. The research review has three purposes. The first purpose is to establish that attempts to understand student resiliency, student success, and student connections, both to their institution and to peers, have been ongoing but still require further study. Secondly, the literature review includes a discussion of what recent research reveals about student motivations, institutional interventions or engagement strategies, and freshman resiliency. Lastly, the review contains an examination of the literature for gaps or holes in research. Researchers such as Turner and Thompson (2014) and Permzadian and Credé's (2015)

have established a correlation between institutional engagement strategies and student retention and GPA, but little work has been done to explain why some students perceive engagement strategy as connecting and motivating but other students view it as disenfranchising. Permzadian and Credé (2015) concluded that extending studies to examine “reaction criteria (i.e., reflecting students’ impressions and feelings about the first-year seminar) and learning criteria (i.e., reflecting how much students learn while in the first-year seminar)” (p. 308) would be beneficial. Only through deeper understanding of student perceptions can educators, researchers and administrators begin to unpack the phenomenon of the freshman transitional experience.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Spady’s (1971) separation theory and Tinto’s (1987) integration theory provide the foundational framework for analyzing and understanding freshman persistence, or from an institutional perspective, freshman retention. Spady’s separation model focuses on individuals’ decision to permanently separate from a social group. Tinto’s integration model equates student persistence and success with integration in the specific university culture. Researchers have established that university education is a social endeavor, and both academic and social connections influence students’ success (Spady, 1971; Spann & Tinto, 1990; Tinto, 1987, 2012; Turner & Thompson, 2014). Institutions can measure freshman success or a students’ desire to persist, both internally and externally. GPA and retention provide external measures; however, it is more difficult to assess internal measures such as individual academic and social growth.

**Theory of separation.** Spady (1971) approached student success from the negative viewpoint of the “drop out” decision (p. 38). To drop out means to make an individual decision to permanently separate from a social structure; the term also connotes failure. Spady’s framework centers on Durkheim’s theory of suicide, the ultimate idea of separation. Spady’s

theory of separation proffers that “extrinsic performance criteria” (p. 38) forms the basis for the drop out decision. Students make the decision based on a perception of institutional judgement. Students receive judgment from many sources throughout the university experience; standardized testing and high school performance lead to admission decisions, mid-term progress reports and GPA lead to admission into a college or a major, and peer, parental, and instructor interactions each carry a perceived judgement. All of these represent external performance criteria that fuel a student’s sense of success, self-esteem, and ultimately the decision to persist or dropout.

According to Spady (1971), students do not necessarily integrate into an institution. Rather, integration is a complex combination of institutional engagement and past experiences. Kindergarten through 12th-grade education, coaches, family support/expectations, and pre-existing friendships comprise normative congruence, and each influences students’ transition to the college setting. Moreira and Telzer’s (2015) study confirmed that pre-existing family connection influences freshmen throughout the transitional experience. Familial connection may actually strengthen throughout the transitional experience and on into young adulthood (Moreira & Telzer, 2015).

Normative congruence “may facilitate or impede the establishment of more consistent patterns of interaction with specific individuals in the college” (Spady, 1971, p. 39). Spady identified six categories within normative congruence that influence the drop out decision, but grade performance and social integration exert the greatest influence. Spady’s (1971) theory of normative congruence has permeated the study of retention initiatives since 1971. Porter and Swing (2006), in support of Spady’s idea of normative congruence, emphasized that research should not be restricted to institutional influence but should be extended to include student



characteristics and external relationships. Moreria and Telzer's (2015) work on the influence of family cohesion in the life of a transitioning freshman, supports Spady's theory of normative congruence and the importance of these prior relationships on social integration.

For Spady (1971), the "quality and quantity of relationships with one's fellow students, complemented by faculty contacts constitutes a social contract" (p. 60). Baber (2012) observed that same social contract phenomena, adding a qualitative emphasis to the dropout decision through his work addressing Black students at a predominately White institution. Baber's work assumes that institutional engagement strategies are intended to enculturate incoming students into the dominate culture, thus to dropout represents a refusal to change one's cultural framework. Here, Baber recognized that many transitional programs push students to enculturate into the dominate culture as a form of social contract. Baber identified the need to explore institutional connection programs from various perspectives of a diverse student body, not simply the dominate culture. Developing a framework that accounts for diverse dimensions of racial, social, gender, or spiritual identity is crucial to expanding the understanding of student experiences (Aruguete & Hardy, 2016; Baber, 2012; Benn, 2002; Castro, 2010; D'Lima, Winsler & Kistansas, 2014; Dika & D'Amico, 2016; Duggan & Williams, 2011; Moreira & Telzer, 2015; Pike, Kuh & McCormick, 2011; Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013; Vergara, 2011).

**Theory of integration.** Tinto's (1987) theory of integration focused on retention or persistence by examining external actions that influence students' decision to persist or drop out.

Tinto identified the features of effective retention programs as:

- an emphasis on the communal nature of college life
- an institutional commitment to students
- a commitment to education, and

- clarity of educational mission (Tinto, 1987, p. 1).

Tinto's investigation of the positive influences of persistence represented a shift from Spady's (1971) work; however, Tinto's focus was still on the institutional need to retain students. Tinto identified the lack of integration, i.e., student-to-institution connection, as the primary barrier to persistence and the absence of significant contact between students and institutional faculty, staff, and administrators as a lack of connection that served to "undermine commitments and thereby heighten the likelihood of departure" (Tinto 1987, p. 5). In 1990, Tinto's research led him to ask a new question: "the question I [Tinto] ask . . . is how should we [institutions of higher learning] act to ensure that all, not just some, of our students are able to learn and grow" (as cited in Spann & Tinto, 1990, p. 22). Tinto's new question shifted the conceptual framework from the institutional level to the individual level. Moreover, this question indicated Tinto recognized that institutions need to engage diverse individuals and people groups with unique intentionality. Duggan and Williams' (2011) research demonstrated that diverse groups responded to institutional engagement strategies differently. Tinto's focus shifted from institutional success meaning greater retention, to students' success, meaning greater persistence, resilience, grit, and connection.

Spady (1971) and Tinto (1987) established the framework through which retention and freshmen persistence have been studied for the past three decades. However, student attributes and perspectives change over time. Aruguete and Hardy (2016) indicated that among African American students at a historically Black university (HBCU), there was a tendency for a fixed mindset. Attributional theory holds that cognitive attributes are fixed, institutional engagement or individual effort could not change a student's cognitive ability (Aruguete & Hardy, 2016). Individuals that adhere to attributional theory have little recourse when confronted with failure.

Researchers and practitioners recognize the idea of generational attributes while remaining cautious of over generalizations and erroneously lumping diverse groups into a single arbitrary demographic (Baber, 2012; Manago, 2012; Turner & Thompson, 2014; Turner, 2016; Wildavsky, Kelly & Carey, 2011). Mango (2012) stated that individualism is on the rise in the U.S., “college students increasingly construct their social identities through public performance in social network sites” (p. 378). Mango’s observation highlights my purpose to acquire a better understanding of the current generation’s perspective on universities’ integration strategies. Freshman persistence then, appears to have two foci: academic success and social connection. Both have strong influences on students’ decision to persist. Researchers (Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Tinto, 1987; Turner & Thompson, 2014) have identified connection as one critical component of a traditional freshman’s success.

**Relational cultural theory.** Another way to view social connection is through the eye of relationships. Formal relationships matter, but deep authentic relationships make a difference. Relational Cultural Theory (RCT), long used in feminist research, holds that authentic relationships are at the heart of cultural influence. Lenz, Holman, Lancaster, and Gotay, (2013) proffered that RCT may be applicable beyond its traditional feminist usage and may apply more generally to a broad spectrum of college students. Authentic relationships with peers, faculty, advisors and staff foster resiliency and result in a greater propensity for students to successfully navigate the complex challenges of the freshman transition. (Lenz et al., 2013)

**Stress inoculation.** Moreira and Telzer (2015) identified the transition to college as an extremely stressful time. Stressors of the transition can lead to increased levels of depression, putting students at risk of failure. Two broad theoretical frameworks set the stage for institutional influence within the context of the freshman transitional experience (Permzadian

and Credé, 2015). The first “one centered on reducing entry stress and facilitating adjustment to college [stress inoculation] and the other centered on improving declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, and motivation [student support]” (Permzadian & Credé, 2015, p. 285). Stress inoculation can be a primary focus of pre-admission orientation programs, academic success programs, first-year seminars, and other institutional engagement strategies.

### **Review of Research and Methodological Literature**

The conceptual framework for this study of freshman perception of institutional engagement and academic support lies in the seamless weaving of the theory of separation, theory of integration, relational cultural theory (RCT), student support, and stress inoculation (Lenz, Holman, Lancaster, & Gotay, 2013; Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1987). Turner and Thompson (2014) highlighted four themes that freshmen identified as most influential: “freshmen focused activities, developing effective study skills, instructor-student relationship, and academic advisements-support” (p.103). External and internal stimuli can influence each of these indicators. Institutions can control some aspects of external influence and recognize the connected nature of human interactions. Considering what is known about the current generation of traditional students, i.e., millennials, a new definition of freshman success in order.

Some components of freshman success seem to be within the span of influence for an institution. Myriad first year transition/engagement strategies have been shown to influence, resiliency/persistence. Permzadian and Credé (2015) reported the results of FYs are mixed when measuring effectiveness in terms of retention or academic performance (p. 278). Lenz, Holman, Lancaster, and Gotay (2013) proffered “that developing relational authenticity with self and others may be one way to promote adjustment to college among freshmen” (p. 13).

Permzadian and Credé argued that student attributes of declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, and motivation are precisely the areas student support interventions and transitional engagements should target. Baber (2012) revealed that a student's identity transforms because of the freshman year transition. According to Porter and Swing (2006), instruction in health and study skills enhances freshman student success. When institutions engage students in transition-focused activities, these engagements can have positive (connecting) results or negative (divisive) results. Diverse people groups have unique responses to engagement strategies and to other peers within the university setting; therefore, institutions must consider cultural diversity when creating freshman integration strategies (Clark & Cundiff, 2009; Duggan & Williams, 2011). The combination of normative congruence factors, peer interaction, and institutional engagement influence students' networks and affect student identity, resiliency, motivation, and grit.

**Freshman success: A working definition.** The extent to which students successfully navigate the transition period from high school to college has a profound influence on their resolve to persist in the university setting. Purdie and Rosser (2011) demonstrated positive correlation between high school GPA and first year college GPA, however, high school performance was negatively correlated with retention. GPA and retention are the two external measures which a preponderance of researchers have used to assess freshman success (Aquino, 2011; Clark & Cundiff, 2009; Furr & Elling, 2002; Kiser & Price, 2008; Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011; Tinto, 1975, 1987; Turner, 2016; Turner & Thompson, 2014; Vergara, 2012). Additionally, Soria and Stubblefield (2015) demonstrated that a student's awareness of personal strengths leads to greater retention.

However, GPA and retention may not be full measures of success. According to Hickinbottom-Braun and Burns (2015), many institutional strategies have defined student success “as simply a consequence of monitoring and managing oneself through strategies” so as to achieve good grades (p. 156). Purdie and Rosser (2011) noted that there is more to student success than simple retention, not failing is not the same as thriving and growing. Permzadian and Credé (2015) supported the thought that external measures are not enough; freshman success must include analysis of development in both academic and social realms. Kitsantas, Winsler, and Huie (2008) focused on student success in terms of self-efficacy, students that can motivate themselves, prioritize, and stay on track in the midst of the social distractions and transitional stress will be more successful. Adams (2012) defined freshman success as growth in personal responsibility. Clark and Cundiff (2009) stated that students must be connected to be successful and that success goes beyond GPA and retention, ultimately extending to social skills, productive faculty relationships, a sense of belonging or personal fit, and connection to something greater than themselves. Successful students are those that feel as if they have some measure of control over their own academic outcome.

Soria and Stubblefield (2015) studied the relationship between a student’s intent to persist and the student’s understanding of personal strengths. When students have identified their own personal strengths, they were more equipped to engage in productive pursuits and more likely to apply those strengths in interdisciplinary circumstances (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). Soria and Stubblefield (2015) found a correlation between retention and a students’ knowledge of personal strengths and argued that the persistence decision is internal to the student. Moreover, Soria and Stubblefield believed that focusing on positive strengths versus shortfalls leads to greater success. Soria and Stubblefield extended the research that Demetriou and Schmitz-Sciborski

(2011) conducted. Demetriou, and Schmitz-Sciborski called for an examination of positive contributors to success and highlighted that most researchers focused on why students fail to persist or give up rather than what attributes contribute to students' success. Furthermore, Aruguete and Hardy (2016) studied the influence of students' mindset on their grit. Aruguete and Hardy identified that a self-generated concept of fixed attributes led African American students to decline in their level of effort when they faced challenges and failure. Essentially, students tended to act on what they believed, and they believed that they "lack[ed] the skills to perform well in college", and that there was nothing that could be done to change that reality (para.7). Freshmen students are empowered when they believe that they have control over their own success. (Aruguete & Hardy 2016; Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). Rigali-Oiler and Kurpius (2013) stated that both self-image and self-analysis play a large role in student success, particularly for ethnic and racial minority students.

While Hickinbottom-Braun and Burns (2015) argued that institutional engagement, specifically FYSSs, may well be detrimental to freshman success, Furr and Elling (2002) recognized the value of institutional engagement and academic intervention programs to influence student success. Focusing on student strengths can enhance student engagement, contribute to a positive view of the institutional culture, and enhance student academic success (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). Experiencing some measure of success will likely yield persistence, improved GPA, social and academic growth, and satisfaction with educational experience.

**Connection and living networks.** Connection is an enabling factor, one that institutions need to understand, and over which institutions can exert influence. Christakis and Fowler (2009) defined *connection* in terms of the network in which people live and function, noting that

we continuously make and remake our social networks. Students exist in a connected network, and each node in a student's network exerts influence over said student. Within networks, there are bonding ties and bridging ties. Bonding ties work to knit a group together, while bridging ties connect groups. Moreover, nodes within a network exert influence to the second and third degrees. One's position within the network can determine one's influence over the group or the converse, the group's influence over the individual.

Corwin and Cintron (2011) illustrated networks for freshmen students: "It is the balance between pre-college relationships and new relationships that is an integral part of student development" (p. 25). Corwin and Cintron explored the composition of student networks through observation of a public setting, i.e., dining areas, within the university community. Students tend to group together based on pre-college friendships. In a post-study depiction of the nature of relationships, Corwin and Cintron illustrate their findings a set of concentric circles with old friends at the center, then new friends, acquaintances next, and everyone else in the outer circle. It is notable that "old friends" includes pre-college relationships that persisted on to upper class years as well as freshman year roommates. In their research into Facebook relationships, Manago, Taylor, and Greenfield (2012) indicated that face-to-face relationships maintained via Facebook were most influential in a student's life. This finding indicates that the intimacy of the relationship is perhaps more important than the structural location.

Corwin and Cintron (2011) support Spady's theory of normative congruence. Corwin and Cintron demonstrated that relationships matter and persist throughout the university experience and beyond, with older, more established relationships carrying the greatest influence. Furthermore, Corwin and Cintron drew the conclusion that reshaping relationships may not be the best form of institutional engagement; rather, learning to work with and influence



the existing relationships brought to the university may be more productive. “It appears to be important to target groups of long-time friends for programming and not necessarily expect every student’s social transition to be that magnificent” (Corwin & Cintron, 2011, p. 34). The model that Corwin and Cintron presented is that student attributes are relatively fixed and that institutional efforts to enculturate students perhaps are conducted in vain. Hickinbottom-Braun and Burns (2015) identified similar phenomena while investigating FYS curriculum and concluded institutional efforts to integrate freshmen students may well be misdirected. Proper understanding of the span of institutional influence may help institutions leverage whatever influence they may have.

In contrast, having a connection to a network does not necessarily satisfy a student’s need to connect or belong. Most students’ networks include both proximal and virtual connections. Kross et al. (2013) studied virtual connections, specifically Facebook usage, and their effects on life satisfaction for young adults. Kross et al. noticed Facebook usage correlated negatively with life satisfaction.

Manago et al. (2012) found large networks of virtual friends led to greater self-satisfaction while Kross et al. (2013) tied time spent on Facebook with diminished life satisfaction; both researcher teams acknowledged that the virtual network has potentially as great an influence over a student as the local proximal network. “Greenfield’s (2009) theory of social change and human development suggests that societal change . . . [has shifted] socialization toward increasing individualism and social relations toward an increased number of relationships” (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012, p. 371). Millennials are individualistic and perhaps possess little understanding of how to foster deep meaningful relationships. Yet, developing meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging appears to be an important enabler

for student resilience, persistence, and success. Jacob and Archie (2008) established a correlation between student belonging or connection and the student's intent to return. Jacob and Archie (2008) found a "sense of community was shown to be a positive predictor of student persistence in two diverse settings, indicating that sense of community is an important factor in student persistence" (p. 284).

**Generational student attributes.** Adherents to generational theory believe generations, i.e., calendar-defined groups of people, exhibit similar characteristics. The dividing lines between generations are not always clear, and acknowledging that exhibiting similar characteristics does not mean that all members of a generation always act and perceive life in the same way is important. However, understanding some general attributes of millennial students is helpful. According to Castro (2010), "scholars investigating the millennial generation suggest that the 'historical location' of millennial college students is dramatically different from that of previous generations, this primarily due to the influence of technology and connectivity" (p.198). Sutherland and Hoover (2007) identified that millennial students share the following seven traits: confident, sheltered, special, team-oriented, conventional, pressured, and achieving. While these traits may fit suburban millennials, they do not necessarily all fit the urban or rural student. Manago et al. (2012) highlighted another characteristic of millennials: they are connected, at least virtually. Many have Facebook friends that number in the hundreds if not thousands. According to Manago et al., the number of friends along with daily contact fuels millennial's self-esteem. Manago et al. also noted the majority of Facebook friends are acquaintances with only surface level relationships: "Facebook facilitates large, impersonal social networks" (Manago et al., 2012, p. 37).

While the attributes of Generation Z, or post-millennials, are still emerging it appears that they possess many millennial traits, they are connected via technology to the world, learning can happen anywhere, and they are increasingly collaborative (Wiedmar, 2015). A baby boomer might view a virtual connection as inferior to a real face-to-face relationship. However, for generation Z, real relationships exist within the virtual world. Virtual relationships are not merely an extension of a face-to-face relationships, but rather, virtual relationships are perceived as absolutely real. Immersed in the digital world, generation Z seamlessly weaves virtual and proximal relationships. Entertainment, interactive connection, internet-based knowledge sources, virtual communication, face-to-face conversation fuse to form reality. Generation Z is generally more comfortable interacting via technology than in a face-to-face environment (Wiedmar, 2015).

**Institutional engagement strategies.** “Despite the voluminous research on Tinto’s (1993) model of student departure, operationalization of academic and social integration consistently theoretically and empirically miss the mark even as they have become more multicultural in nature” (Smith, 2010, p. 201). Institutional engagement has been the topic of many studies in the past decade. Lenz et al. (2013) emphasized authentic relationships as being essential in any engagement strategy. Turner and Thompson (2014) studied the perception of freshmen and sophomore students to gain a better understanding of the obstacles and enablers to successful transition. Turner and Thompson identified four enablers: freshmen focused activities, developing effective study skills, instructor-student relationship, and academic advisements-support. “Freshmen focused activities and events were cited by 67% of the participants as the greatest enabler” (Turner & Thompson, 2014, p. 100). Freshmen focused activities include orientation, summer engagement, learning communities, initiative programs,

structured dorm activities, mentorship, and others.

Learning communities are another form of engagement that has received extensive research attention (Chatriand, 2012; Pike et al., 2011; Smith, 2010). Pike, Kuh, and McCormick (2011) identified a relationship between learning communities and student engagement: “research suggests that positive relationships between learning community participation and desirable educational outcomes are an indirect result of higher levels of engagement for students who participate in learning communities” (p. 300). Chatriand (2012) found that students who participated in Greek life were more likely to persist, while participation in learning community led to greater persistence and improved GPA. Additionally, voluntary participation in academic skills programs, such as a tutoring or writing center led to improved GPA. Permzadian and Credé (2015) indicated that while FYS programs were less effective when combined with a learning community, stand-alone FYS programs had greater efficacy.

Institutional engagement concerns more than mere orientation to university processes and policies. Baber (2012) demonstrated that institutional engagement strategies are potentially transformational. Baber interviewed 16 Black students at a predominately White university. Baber discovered that “transition was influenced by internal reconceptualization of racial identity and external support” (p. 76). As the students transition into college, the external support that institutional mentors and peers offer influences students’ transformation. Baber believes that a student’s identity is not fixed rather it is transformed by student-to-student and instructor-to-student relationships, institutional engagement and lived cultural experiences.

**Grit, motivation, and resiliency.** Resiliency, motivation and grit are necessary components of academic success and navigating the demands of a transition to the universities socio-cultural environment. Adams (2012) identified grit and resiliency as components that

freshman often lack. In addition to preparing for the cognitive demands of an academically rigorous college, students must also be prepared for the social or non-cognitive demands of the transition to college life. Adams stated that freshmen “also must be able to manage their own time, get along with roommates, and deal with setbacks. Resiliency and grit, along with the ability to communicate and advocate, are all crucial life skills” (Adams, 2012, p. 1). Resiliency is not the same as fortitude or individual strength to persist; rather, resiliency is an amalgamation of internal persistence and a feeling of belonging or connection, being valued, and contributing to something bigger than one’s self. Greater resiliency is necessary if students feel as if they are an outsider to the dominate culture of the institution. Baber (2012) asserted that Black students at a predominately white institution, viewed themselves as outsiders to the dominant Eurocentric university culture. Even in this circumstance, culturally appropriate institutional engagement can build resiliency. “Interaction between external sources of cultural capital and the internal process of racial identity development influenced campus climate perceptions and behaviors of African American students” (Baber, 2012, p.77). “The most valuable outcome of this interaction is resiliency” (Baber, 2012, p.77). Adams revealed that while cognitive factors influenced a student’s resiliency, socio-cultural factors had a greater impact.

**Cultural considerations.** Engagement strategies are perceived through an individual’s cultural lens; students of diverse backgrounds likely have unique perspectives. Students from under-represented (UREP) minority groups are likely to respond differently to engagement strategies than would their counterparts from the dominate culture (Baber, 2012; Castro, 2012; Contreras, 2011; D’Lima, Winsler, & Kitsantas, 2014; Dika, & D’Amico, 2016; Manago et al., 2012). Cultural stereotypes yoke students and make it difficult to find fit and belonging. Cultural stereotypes also add complexity to institutional engagement strategies. “Recent reports about

today's millennial-generation college students... highlight their greater acceptance of cultural diversity, increased civic participation, and advocacy for social justice issues” (Castro, 2012, p. 198). Despite the millennial generational view that values diversity and multi-culturalism, Castro (2012) warned that there is still concern, “millennial generation college students who uphold ‘generic’ ideals of multicultural education and who lack critical awareness may still be as blind to oppression as their less tolerant predecessors 20 years ago” (p. 207). It would be naïve to think our society has conquered long-standing divides. Racial/ethnic, gender, and religious bias still exists and should be factors in planning any institutional engagement strategy.

Cultural diversity may extend beyond ethnic and racial definitions to academic, social and religious subgroups within the campus community. Venuelo and Salvatory (2016) define culture as a “symbolic field underlying the (dis)similarities in the subject’s [student’s] values, statements, attitudes and behavior” (p. 323). Therefore, a cultural subgroup may simply consist of a group of students with similar interests. Dika and D’Amico (2016) found that a student’s intended major played a role in establishing student perspective, thus forming subcultures within the campus community. For a faith based institution with open enrollment like University XYZ, students with differing faith backgrounds or religious affiliations constitute cultural subgroups that fit within Venuelo and Salvatory’s definition. Another example of a subgroup, first generation students, brings unique perspectives to the freshman experience. Many first-generation students come from backgrounds that value “family or community interdependence” (Rease-Miles & Lopez, 2015, p. 54). That background can make the transition to a more publically vulnerable setting of college dorm life particularly challenging. Dika and D’Amico’s (2016) research revealed that early academic success may increase retention for first generation college students.

**Methodological choices.** Freshman retention and institutional engagement have been topics of study since the 1970s. External measures of GPA and retention have consistently been the measure of programmatic success (Clark & Cudiff, 2009; Furr & Elling, 2002; Kiser & Price, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini 1979; Pike et al, 2011; Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Purdie & Rosser, 2011; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1987, 2013; Turner & Thompson 2014). The focus of the quantitative research has been on engagement strategies that seem to improve student GPA and/or retention numbers, with the institution being the primary beneficiary. Through correlational and causal analysis, researchers have established that institutional engagement changes the freshmen transitional experience. External measures of retention help to justify the expenses institutions incur from designing and implementing engagement strategies. It is important to remember that the product of higher education is also a resource; higher education exists to serve the students, community, and culture in which it exists. Therefore, the health of higher educational institutions must be considered not only in terms of production of graduates or retention, but also in terms of student growth throughout the educational journey. Most commonly tied to freshman success, GPA and retention are measurable institutional outcomes; however, research reveals that those two measures do not provide a complete picture of the growth of a student through his or her freshman experience. According to Permzadian and Credé (2015), few researchers have attempted to unpack student perception and the how and why of student connection, engagement and persistence.

### **Review of Methodological Issues**

Contemporary research into freshman success, retention, and persistence has taken the form of both quantitative and qualitative studies. Quantitative studies were both correlational and causal nature. The studies reviewed fit into two categories: those that were specifically

examining the freshman transition to higher education, and those that investigated the attributes of contemporary traditional-aged freshmen (18-25), i.e., millennial generation students.

Together with institutional faculty and staff, millennials construct the campus culture. The cumulative effects of campus interactions are what researchers are attempting to understand.

The qualitative researchers, such as Baber (2012), Corwin and Cintron (2011), Hickinbottom-Braun and Burns, (2015), appeared to be more student-focused, although some, Turner and Thompson (2014) and Duggan and Williams (2011), still used retention and GPA as assessments of success, while quantitative researchers seemed to address the problem from more of an institutional perspective. Two phenomenological studies attempted to unpack the initial transitional experience of college freshman. Baber (2012) studied Black student experiences at a predominately White institution. Through the multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI), Baber unpacked the ways in which complexity of racial identity interacts with the dominate culture to affect student success. Corwin and Cintron (2011) examined and described functional student networks. In separate case studies, Duggan and Williams (2011), Turner (2012), and Turner and Thompson (2014) examined elements of students' perception of the transitional phenomena. Benn's (2002) case study examined African American student's perception of factors that contributed to persistence and retention.

In two quantitative studies, researchers attempted to delve into students' perception of institutional engagement strategies. Lenz et al. (2013) examined the association between relational health and students' adjustment to higher education, establishing correlation between quality of relationships and students' intent to persist. A priori power analysis and multiple regression analysis lent credibility to the authors' conclusions. Soria and Stubblefield (2015) studied the impact of student's self-awareness of personal strength on retention. Other



quantitative studies such as, Aquino (2011), Arugute and Hardy (2016), Chatriand (2012), Clark and Cundiff (2009), Dika and D'Amico (2016), Pike, Kuh, and McCormick, (2011), Porter and Swing, (2006), explored correlational, predictive, or causational connections between myriad interventions and freshman retention and GPA. Data for these studies came from student surveys as well as institutional and national data sources. Castleman and Paige (2016), D'Lima, Winsler, and Kitsantas, (2014) used quantitative methods to explore student motivations. Rigali-Oiler, and Kurpius, (2013) used quantitative methods to establish that diverse people groups experience transition in differing ways, supporting Baber's (2012) qualitative findings. A later section of this chapter contains a discussion of noted exceptions, limitations, and critiques of the reviewed literature.

### **Synthesis of Research Findings**

Arugute and Hardy (2106), Duggan and Williams (2011), Turner (2016), Turner and Thompson (2014) documented the positive impact of FYs, learning communities, common interest dorms, study skills interventions. Those researchers' findings have led to a great effort to improve retention through these types of engagements. However, researchers such as Baber (2012), Dika and D'Amico (2016), Duggan and Williams (2011), Hickinbottom-Braun and Burns (2016), and Rigali-Oiler, and Kurpius, (2013), have also identified a problem: traditional engagement and transitional programming strategies may not have the effect of connecting millennial students with the institution or with peer students. It is possible that institutional transition programs (traditions, engagement strategies, success programs, and school culture) intended for connection actually create a divisive or unwelcoming perception in the minds of traditional freshmen students. Duggan and Williams (2011) found that "college orientation has some positive impact, but something is still missing . . . some students who take orientation

courses persist to graduation; others do not” (p. 130). Dika and D’Amico (2016) had contradictory findings within their study; with some underrepresented minority student groups, particularly first generation students, their “perceived academic fit did not contribute to persistence” (p.379). Moreover, Premzadian and Credé (2015) identified that first year seminars had little to no statistical effect on GPA and only a slight effect on retention (p. 294).

Hickinbottom-Braun and Burns (2015) argued that market-place practices drive curriculum selection for institutional FYSSs. Inappropriate curriculum and institutional motivations may be leading higher education away from its traditional purpose. “The role of the university has transformed from educating citizens to preparing workers” (Hickinbottom-Braun & Burns, 2015, p. 155). This line of thinking leads the student, and perhaps the student’s parents, to consider the degree strictly in terms of earning potential. Hickinbottom-Braun and Burns proffered that instead of focusing on a set of strategies that presumably will lead to success, FYSSs as well as other institutional engagement strategies might serve both students and academia better by highlighting the educational journey as one worth taking in and of itself. Institutions could accomplish this goal through emphasizing students’ social connections.

Cristakis and Fowler (2009) demonstrated that humans are social creatures: we live and function in structural networks and exert influence to the second and third degree of relationship. Corwin and Cintron (2011) explored structural relationships within existing networks on campus. Structure and position within the network yields fields or spheres of influence within which individual students function. Evaluating potential levels of influence based on structural position within the network fits well with RCT. Based on RCT, the depth and authenticity of a relationship will determine the amount of influence that relationship exerts. This leads one to believe that proximal location, depth, and authenticity of a relationship derive the strength of the

said relationship.

Research indicates that differentiated engagement strategies could engender freshmen persistence across cultural, socio-economic, student interest, and gender divides. (Baber, 2012; Dika & D’Amico, 2016; Duggan & Williams, 2011; Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius’, 2013). Tinto’s (1987) integration model included an emphasis on community and the social network aspect of university life, a point that Christakis and Fowler’s (2009) findings supported. Turner and Thompson (2014) identified two categories of influence that have a strong effect on student persistence and resilience—academic success and connection—but the problem of a lack of grit or persistence remains. According to data collected by NCES (2015), 40% of transitioning students do not persist to sophomore year or beyond. Dika and D’Amico (2016) stated that fostering academic or social fit led to increased retention for most students, that correlation was diminished for students that already had strong academic fit, particularly those intending to major in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields. For STEM majors, providing supports that lead to early academic success had greater influence over retention. Connecting to and/or fitting in at an institution seems to be important for individual students and for institutions.

Connection is important on two fronts. First, students live, work, and function as part of a network. This network consists of seen and unseen forces that exert influence over the student. Second, because institutions are part of the network, their engagement strategies and culture influence students. Through proper application of influential efforts, institutions can leverage the power of that network to foster student growth. Turner’s (2016) work illustrated the importance of a well-developed understanding of student characteristics and the resulting implications for institutional engagement strategies.

## **Critique of Previous Research**

Babbie (2013) cautioned researchers and study consumers to be aware of errors in inquiry. This section of the literature review includes a discussion of common critiques of both quantitative and qualitative methodology as well as specific critiques sampled from the research. Moreover, this review contains an examination of validity, chosen methods, and analysis of collected data, specifically considering four sources of research errors: inaccurate observations, overgeneralizations, selective observations, and illogical reasoning (Babbie, 2013). Every study will have limitations, delimitations, and assumptions that readers must consider. Careful analysis of the alignment of the research question, population, and methodology is necessary. Readers should also give consideration to data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Each consumer must determine reliability and transferability of findings in the context of his or her application.

Duggan and Williams (2011) completed a document review of the syllabus from 10 transitional/orientation courses and then interviewed 60 participants. The goal was to assess student perception of the usefulness of the course. Duggan and Williams did not provide information on how they selected the participants, but they did state that they conducted surveys within two years of transitional/orientation course completion. Participants completed an interview and a survey assessing the usefulness of the transitional/orientation content. Without specific content of the survey and interview, assessing the validity of the tools Duggan and Williams used to address research questions is difficult; however, the responses and conclusions they presented directly support research questions. Duggan and Williams's study is compelling because their results are logically connected to their research questions, and they presented both positive and negative observations.

Turner (2016) focused on freshman male students in his qualitative study. The sample was purposive in that it was comprised of current freshmen, sophomores, and students that had dropped out of college. Perspectives from these three unique sample groups lent credibility to Turner's conclusions. To address validity of the study, Turner sought inputs from 50 potential participant freshmen to establish categories of concern. Turner then chose 16 participants from the 50 initial respondents for interview. Using this methodology ensured that the interview pool demographically represented the intended groups for the study. Basing the interviews upon the identified categories meant that the data collection tool aligned with the purpose of the research. Demographic descriptions of the participants and the research environment improved generalizability of conclusions.

Aruguete and Hardy (2016) employed a convenience sample of students recruited from freshman level required classes. Although the sampling was not random, it was purposeful and a reasonable representation of the freshman class. Data collected related directly to the hypothesis. Hypothesis testing, statistical analysis, and the authors' interpretation of the results are logically sound.

D'Lima et al. (2014) conducted a convenience sample of 596 freshmen. At the end of the semester, only 232 students remained to complete the second survey. This circumstance necessitated a statistical analysis to compare the two study groups. Analysis revealed that with the exception of GPA, the two groups were similar. The similarity means that the results of this study can still be viable but the researchers must account for the change in the study sample. In the discussion of limitations, D'Lima et al. were transparent about the change:

The impact of attrition on study findings should be carefully considered as the students who did not participate in the follow-up study, on average, had poorer academic

performance than those who remained in the study throughout both time points (p. 354).

A major critique of qualitative analysis is that researcher bias can easily taint their results; therefore, Baber (2012) took appropriate steps to avoid bias and subjectivity. First, Baber identified a constructivist epistemology for the study, which gave perspective to the researcher's conclusions. Secondly, Baber engaged colleagues in discourse to discuss interpretations after each round of interviews; Corwin and Cintron (2011), Turner and Thompson (2014), and Benn (2002) took similar steps to ensure the integrity of their gathered data. Each employed some form of informant review of researcher interpretations for confirmation. Thirdly, Baber used reflexivity to guard against personal bias in the interpretation of interview responses.

Each of the qualitative studies established a connection between the researcher's question and chosen methodology. Further, the inclusion of detailed literature reviews established the foundations for each study. Each author respected the process enough to be appropriately cautious about conclusions and claims. For example, Duggan and Williams (2011) highlighted conflicting results in the perceived effectiveness of content in freshman transition classes. While some students found the interventions and course content to be valuable, other students considered the same content to be unusable. This admission demonstrates a degree of integrity that leads the consumer to give careful consideration to other claims within the study.

Babbie (2013) stated that the primary purpose of sampling is to select a set of elements that will "accurately portray the total population" (p. 135). The most appropriate method for sampling large populations is random sampling. A large sample size compensates for selection errors in probability sampling when sampling the entire population is not possible. Qualitative researchers often employ quota or purposive sampling. Researchers, such as Baber (2012) and Turner and Thompson (2014), use this methodology to ensure that specific sub groups germane

to the research goals are represented. For survey research, response rate is a concern; the lower the response rate, the greater concern for a sampling error. Additionally, informants that choose to respond to a survey may differ demographically from non-respondents, thereby injecting sampling bias into the study. One sampling concern noted is that Benn (2002) had a close working relationship with all but two of the study participants; this relationship could have had a profound influence on the outcome. This danger was somewhat mitigated because Benn noted the relationship as a limitation.

## **Summary**

External measures indicate the success of freshman retention programs and institutional engagement strategies. However, students' perception of institutional engagement strategies, the role engagement strategies play in building connection, and the actual role connection plays on a student's resolve to persist in higher education is unknown. Understanding institutional engagement at this level requires insight into the freshman transitional phenomena. While Turner and Thompson (2014) used a qualitative methodology to study the freshman transitional phenomena, there remains a need to understand more deeply what engages or disengages a freshman student. Baber (2012) indicated the need for academia to understand cultural and socio-economic influences on freshman persistence. Lenz et al. (2013) stated that more qualitative studies can add depth to the current understanding of institution-to-student connection.

Jacobs and Archie (2008) indicated a level of mystery that still surrounds social integration; unexplained constructs include: elements that contribute to connection and how and why those elements influence social integration. Jacobs and Archie identified four important points of connection; a sense of community, identity, solidarity, and interaction, highlighting

factors that influence the sense of community as paramount for future studies. Dika and D'Amico (2016) furthered Jacob and Archie's research stating that qualitative methodologies will contribute to institutional understanding of freshman transition, and fill in narrative missing from quantitative studies. Kiser and Price (2008) and Chatriand (2012) both called for qualitative research into the analysis of connection with respect to the freshman transitional experience and persistence. Permzadian and Credé (2015) agreed that the external measures of GPA and retention are insufficient for understanding institution-to-student connections and called for qualitative studies to more deeply understand reaction and learning criteria.

Turner (2016), Aruguete and Hardy (2016), and Permzadian and Credé (2015) echo the need to understand why and how students form connections and relationships with their education institutions and peers. Tinto's (1987) integration model emphasized the influence of both the social and academic culture of an institution. The student's lived experience, maybe different than that which is intended, is the sum and total external and internal influences colored by the student's perception thereof. This literature review contains discussions on Spady's (1971) theory of separation, Tinto's (1987) theory of integration, Lenz et al.'s (2013) views on relational cultural theory, and Premzadian and Credé's (2015) concept of stress inoculation. Through synthesizing these theories, I have created a unique conceptual framework for understanding interactions that influence a student's desire and ability to persist in higher education. I will apply this framework to answer the research questions that will guide this study:

- RQ 1: How do freshmen students perceive institutional engagement strategies?
- RQ 2: Why does connection (institutional fit) play a role in a student's resolve to persist in higher education?



The qualitative, exploratory, embedded, single-case study, conducted at a mid-sized private university in the Pacific Northwest, will serve to fill a gap in institutional understanding of how freshmen perceive institutional engagement strategies. Specifically, to unpack the how and/or why connection (institutional fit) plays a role in supporting freshman student resiliency. Further, I intend to identify why some students may perceive institutional engagement strategies as connective while others may view the same strategies as divisive.

To explore a lived experience, (a traditional freshman's transition to college), one must understand the phenomena within which that lived experience occurs. Yin (2012) believed case study analysis is an appropriate method for answering descriptive, qualitative questions about phenomena. Using an exploratory case study research design, my purpose was to understand why connection (institutional fit) plays a role in supporting student resiliency. Further, I identified why some students perceive institutional engagement strategies as connective while others view the same strategies as divisive. Interviews allowed students to express their perceived connection with peers, instructors and institution, thus ultimately leading to a deeper understanding of how institutional engagement strategies effect students and why students connect. Student perceptions of cultural connection drive motivations, desires, and resilience.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The transition from high school to college is a complex interweaving of internal motivations and external influences (Lenz et al., 2013; Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012; Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1987). Institutional engagement strategies have been employed in efforts to exert a positive influence over transitioning students. However, higher education's traditional engagement and transitional programming may not engender connection nor promote academic success. It is possible that institutional transition programs (traditions, engagement strategies, success programs, and school culture) may actually diminish student engagement or create a divisive or unwelcoming perception in the minds of traditional freshmen students (Duggan & Williams, 2010; Hickinbottom-Braun & Burns, 2015; Permzadian & Credé, 2015). Therefore, there is a need for a deeper look into this transitional experience (Dika & D'Amico, 2015; Moreira & Telzer, 2015). Quantitative and qualitative researchers agree that deeper analysis of the transitional experience would be valuable, and many scholars avow that qualitative methods can provide a view of the freshman transition that researchers in previous studies have missed (Aruguete & Hardy, 2016; Dika & D'Amico, 2015; Moreira & Telzer, 2015; Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Turner, 2016).

Institutions and researchers do not know how students perceive institutional engagement strategies, the role engagement strategies play in building connection, nor the actual role connection plays on a student's resolve to persist in higher education. It is appropriate then, to explore the lived experience through the eyes of freshmen students. Yin (2014) promoted qualitative studies for exploring such lived experiences. I employed a case study design incorporating in-depth interviews to gain insights into the freshman social environment. Interviews served to uncover how institutional strategies affect students' resiliency and why

some students perceive institutional engagement strategies as connective while others view the same strategies as disengaging. The demographic composition of a freshman class can be characterized as experientially homogeneous but demographically heterogeneous. Diversity includes socio-economic status, racial/ethnic background, gender identities, spiritual backgrounds, as well as students' academic areas of interest. A holistic case study served to paint a picture of the freshman transitional experience for the cohort. Embedded cases gave independent voice to myriad diverse sub-groups within the population and offered the opportunity for cross-case analysis, thus leading to a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Babbie, 2013; Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014).

### **Research Questions**

In qualitative research, investigators use a research design to accumulate a body of data (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). The data then is coded and analyzed in light of the research questions. In contrast to quantitative studies which ask participants specific questions and then statistically analyze the responses, qualitative studies leave space for ideas to develop that may have been beyond the design of the research instrument or the imagination of the investigator. The following research questions provided the lenses through which the results were viewed.

- RQ 1: How do freshmen students perceive institutional engagement strategies?
- RQ 2: Why does connection (institutional fit) play a role in a student's resolve to persist in higher education?

### **Purpose and Design of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory, embedded, single-case study, conducted at a mid-sized private university in the Pacific Northwest, was to understand how freshmen perceive institutional engagement strategies. Specifically, to unpack the how and/or why connection

(institutional fit) plays a role in supporting freshman student resiliency. Further, the researcher intended to identify how and why some students may perceive institutional engagement strategies as connective while others may view the same strategies as divisive. Using an exploratory embedded case study, which unpacked the phenomena of first semester transition and the traditional freshman's perception thereof, this study sheds light on actual effects of institutional engagement strategies and programs and extend existing understandings of the transitional phenomena. Four information-rich repositories provided data for triangulation: pre-existing institutional data, documentation of institutional engagement strategies and programs, investigator observations, and student interviews. Triangulation occurs when a researcher uses multiple sources of data to provide convergence on a single phenomenon (Babbie, 2013; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, Yin, 2014). The design of the study enables one to view the freshman transitional experience through the lenses of diverse student groups.

### **Research Population and Sampling Method**

**Population.** The population of a qualitative study is the pool from which the sample is taken, in this case the population consisted of the 478 Traditional Freshmen in the University XYZ class of 2020. This population was homogeneous in that they are all 18–25 years of age, they were all second semester freshmen, and they all had a shared experience. From application and admission, to GE-125 Freshman Seminar, and on to the campus culture, they have a shared common experience. However, the individual perception of that experience is not homogeneous. This means that diverse subgroups may have perceptions that differ from the perception of the majority of the students at University XYZ. A stratified purposive sampling process provided voice to aggregated semi-homogenous sub-groups within the Freshman cohort.

**Sample size selection.** A sample is a selection taken from the population, meant to be representative of the population. Sample sizes for qualitative studies are based on saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2015; Yin, 2014). Largely subjective, saturation simply means exhausting all available information gathering opportunities. However, Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2015) offered a systemic methodology for assessing saturation, based on the idea of “information power” (p. 2). The greater the information power, the fewer samples one needs to achieve saturation. Malterud et al. based information power on five criteria, here broken into two categories for ease of discussion. The first category, based on the analysis of the researcher’s intent in relation to the phenomenon in question, pertains to study aim and study specificity (Malterud et al., 2015). The second category applies to data collection and analysis methodology and includes the application of a theory, quality of the dialogue, and case study design (Malterud et al., 2015). What follows is a brief discussion of the five criteria they pertain to my study and my concluded sample size.

The first criterion was study aim, an assessment of study focus. This study was a focused study because every traditional student at University XYZ experienced a similar transition: the move from a high school setting through college acceptance, orientation, and enculturation into the college community. The second criterion was sample specificity. One sees a fairly homogenous phenomenon, i.e., all participants shared a common experience, the freshman transition at University XYZ, the research questions specifically interrogated the phenomena, therefore the study had great specificity. Stratified purposive sampling was used to sample specific sub-groups. This process ensured that sub-groups had a specific voice. Malterud et al. (2015) cautioned researchers that purposive sampling is a potentially confounding factor because

exerting unintended influence on the outcome through purposive sample selection is possible. The limitations section contains additional discussion about this point.

The third criterion was an assessment of the quality of the dialogue. Surveys have weak dialogue while open ended interviews have strong dialogue (Patton, 2000; Yin, 2014). A semi-structured open interview therefore, lead to strong dialogue. The fourth criterion was theory. This study viewed a phenomenon through an established theoretical framework, however the analysis was exploratory in nature, therefore the study did not employ an applied theory as in grounded theory analysis. Grounded theory analysis requires the investigator to proffer a theory and analyze data to establish if the case fits into that theory. Thematic analysis does not impute an expectation on the data but rather allows the data to speak and then to identify themes based on what is heard, thereby providing a greater opportunity to unpack both positive and negative perceptions. The fifth and final criterion for consideration was the mode of case analysis. The study was planned using a single case design with embedded sub-cases. In this application, all voices sampled contribute to the holistic analysis, synergistically building the corporate perception. Sub-case voices are used for cross-case analysis, to identify patterns of homogeneity or disparity.

The study had a focused aim, a dense specific experience, and strong dialogue; all three contribute to a small sample size, Malterud et al. (2015) stated 3–5 voices as a sufficient sample size for such a study. The exploratory nature of this study and the cross-case analysis of embedded cases each contributed to a need for a larger sampling. Cross-case analysis contributed most to the larger sample size requirement. Malterud et al. (2015) believed six to 10 participants is sufficient for cross-case analysis. When considering information power, the sample size needs to be large enough to allow for cross-case analysis and to provide a voice for

each of the desired embedded cases. After accounting for academic status, ethnicity/racial identification, and religious preference, while ensuring saturation (minimum of two voices) for each sub-case, 8 – 12 participants was the targeted sample size.

**Sampling method.** Stratified purposive sampling ensured that the study included at least 2 participants in each sub-group. Sub-group membership was not necessarily exclusive. For example, a student may have been on the academic watch list and self-identified as non-Christian, thereby satisfying criteria on multiple lists. The process for stratified purposive sampling included these steps:

1. Acquired a list of current freshman students with demographic attributes attached.
2. Developed a purposive list for initial invitation.
3. Presented the study opportunity to initial group of students
4. Assessed student attributes for the willing participants and offered follow-on invitations appropriately to saturate each embedded case
5. Iterated the process until study participant goals were reached

Analysis of institutional data painted a demographic picture of the freshman class. Institutional data provided demographic information on participants, that same information was used to ensure saturation of sub-groups for embedded cases.

**Identification of demographics.** To provide focus, not all potential first or second degree demographics will be controlled for purposive sampling. I constructed embedded cases by aggregating interviewees with similar demographics. Study Demographics in Table 1 details demographics of interest, see the description of sample section of Chapter 4 for demographic make-up of actual participants.

Table 2

*Study Demographics*

First Degree Demographics	Second Degree Demographics
Gender	Female/Male
Race/Ethnicity	White-non-Hispanic Black Hispanic Asian Pacific Islander Alaskan/Native American
* Religious Preference/Affiliation	Christian <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Protestant</li> <li>- Catholic</li> <li>- Reformed</li> <li>- Orthodox</li> <li>- No preference</li> </ul> Jewish Muslim Other: to be defined based on participant pool
Academic Standing	Good Academic Stress
First Generation College Student	Yes/No

\* Religious practice/affiliation is germane to the study because University XYZ is a faith based university that practices open enrollment, therefore it is contextually important to gather the perspective of students that may not share a common Christian World View (Vergara, 2012).



**Data collection.** Working through University XYZ's gatekeeper, the chair of the institutional review board, I received permission to conduct research within the bounds of an IRB approved study. Researchers design data collection with research questions in mind, noting that in interview-based qualitative research, one conducts interviews to build a repository of data, researchers then query that data. The primary goal was to acquire a body of data that could serve to answer the research questions (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Multiple pre-existing institutional data sources served as the repository for descriptive and demographic data. A focused review of institutional documentation referencing engagement programs and strategies employed specifically to interact with transitioning students, provided an understanding of the institutional perspective of the freshman transition. I conducted interviews using a semi-structured research guide (see Appendix A), recorded, and transcribed each interview to facilitate coding and analysis of data collected. Observations provided a cross reference to the interview transcript.

### **Instrumentation**

According to Seidman (2006), interviewing is not designed to test hypothesis but rather to provide an opportunity for the subject to reconstruct an experience and relay personal perceptions. A semi-structured interview formed the primary instrument for data collection in this study. Three broad interview categories were included to provide structure for reflection:

1. Application and admission decision
2. First semester experiences
3. Campus culture and community

Each category began with an initial open-ended question constructed with the goal of presenting an opportunity for the interviewee to share his or her story. Subsequent probing questions were designed to gather data in areas that might not surface in the initial response. Probing questions

were not asked of each interviewee. Rather, probing questions were dependent upon the breadth and level of detail in the initial response. Appendix A contains the complete research guide.

In a case study, answers to the research questions are the researcher's responsibility (Yin, 2014); accordingly, the instrumentational design must reflect the need to collect data that will serve to answer the research questions. Instrumentation in this study included recorded interviews and investigator's field notes. A researcher can improve validity of a study through proper planning, developing research tools before collecting data, following a well-organized research guide that demonstrates alignment with both the problem statement and the research questions, and implementing a thorough analysis (Babbie, 2013; Patton, 2000; Seidman, 2006). I used three broad interview categories to develop the structure of the research guide (see Appendix A). The intent in the interviews was threefold:

1. Develop rapport through honoring and understanding the interviewee.
2. Listen to his or her story to gather details about their freshman transitional experience.
3. Create opportunity for the interviewee to process his or her story and reflect on its meaning.

A field test of research guide was conducted through professional collaboration with field experts, practitioners in the field of student life. Dr. Craig Chatriand PhD, an Associate Dean, Community Standards & Compliance and a Mr. Landon Crecelius, a Director of Student Success each reviewed the research guide and provided content inputs. Both experts recognized the value of this line of questioning as well as the need for research focused on student perception. Their professional experience helped to shape the research guide. Dr. Noelle Wiersma PhD, is a psychologist and experienced qualitative researcher. She was uniquely positioned to critique this study because she was intimately familiar with both university life and qualitative research. She

provided input into the structure and content of the research guide and the process of thematic analysis. Her inputs and advice provided validation to the study design and contributed to the final version of the research guide.

As interviews progressed, the research guide helped the researcher to move participants organically from, application, admission, and decision phase, through the first semester experience, and then, shifting conversational focus, to the campus climate and culture. Each of these three categories provided a reflective opportunity for participants to rediscover points of connection and then to unpack the meaning of that connection within the context of the category. The body of data proved to be an extensive and thorough retelling of the freshman experience.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

In exploratory analysis, the focus is on the information that emerges from the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewees (Creswell, 2013; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Applied thematic analysis allows for an open coding technique that identifies emergent sub-themes within the data analysis (Creswell, 2013; Rapley, 2016; Yin, 2014). Thematic analysis began with a deep reading of collected data, thus allowing emergent ideas to coalesce into codes that were then combined into the initial themes. Described as a progressive process, different theorists discuss thematic analysis in terms of phases or spirals (Creswell, 2013; Guest et al., 2012). Themes are then aligned with the research questions and develop based on identified patterns of consistency within the coding. Themes become families of ideas that are followed and analyzed based on the patterns noted in the data. Open coding allows researchers the opportunity to identify unexpected patterns and negative findings (Babbie, 2013; Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Researchers consider finding unexpected patterns and contradictory or negative results one of the most important parts of data analysis (Babbie, 2013; Patton, 2000).

Creswell (2013) illustrated thematic analysis as the “data analysis spiral” (p.183). While I had planned to follow Creswell’s data analysis spiral, actual analysis was modified and took the following form:

1. Collected documents, conducted and transcribed interviews
2. Organized data into data file systems
3. Used deep reading to understand institutional engagement intentions
4. Used deep reading and initial coding of interviews to identify broad themes, student-institution intersections and zones of contact
5. Coded Institutional documents to understand intended purpose of institutional engagements within each zone of contact
6. Coded interview transcripts to produce the initial understanding of freshman perceptions
7. Organize emergent codes into themes and categories
8. Analyzed codes and themes in light of research questions to describe and classify the data, establish context and draw comparisons.
9. Represent and visualize findings.

Interview recordings, notes, and transcripts, as well as institutional documents were included in the analysis. Documents were studied in-situ, that is within the context within which they applied, paying particular attention to the institutional intent behind the contact or information described in the document. Documents provided background information and a framework for understanding of the intended institution-student relationship from the institutional perspective. The intent was not critique engagement strategies or provide an

assessment of effectiveness, but rather to examine consistencies and contradictions between institutional intentions and freshman perceptions.

Theoretical observations throughout the analysis process highlighted thoughts that can lead to identifying unexpected patterns or paths for inquiry, future themes for research, or new themes for modifying codes (Babbie, 2013; Ripley, 2016; Yin, 2013). See Chapter 4 and 5 for details of collection and analysis of results.

### **Limitations of Research Design**

There was no intention to identify a causal or correlative relationship between institutional engagement and freshman persistence; however, results may serve to help practitioners and institutions understand the meanings that freshmen attribute to the transitional experience. In general, interviews do not provide a clear representation of the social world; rather, interviews offer limited access to perceptions of individuals within the community/culture (Miller & Glassner, 2016; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Results are applicable to the specific context of University XYZ and may be generalizable to similar institutions.

Diverse student populations were aggregated into embedded cases. This procedure was not meant to imply homogeneity within the embedded case, but rather to indicate only similarity. Full disclosure of the demographic composition of each embedded group will allow readers to determine applicability of findings to their specific context. See description of the sample in Chapter 4. Aggregated subcases did reduce the required sample size and yielded a volume of data that was manageable for this study.

### **Validation**

Validity in qualitative research can be viewed from internal and external perspectives. Internal validity is related to the alignment of the research instruments to what the researcher

claims to be investigating, while external validity is concerned with the extent to which conclusions are generalizable to other groups within the population (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The strategy of triangulation, or engaging in multiple methods such as observation, interviews, and document reviews, contributes to internal validation and can lead to a more valid and reliable understanding of the phenomena (Creswell 2013; Yin, 2104). Convergent evidence strengthens the construct of qualitative research and leads to greater credibility and dependability (Yin, 2014).

Credibility is an assessment of trustworthiness. The consumer's judgement of a researcher's credibility depends on the rigor of the study techniques to include both method of data collection and data analysis (Miller & Glassner, 2016; Patton, 2000; Yin, 2014). The research plan, appendix A, is aligned with the problem statement and the research questions thereby contributing to credibility. The systematic process for data collection and handling served to ensure complete and accurate collection. Audio recordings were used in combination with interview transcripts.

Dependability, which is synonymous with reliability, is the extent to which the study would produce the same results if it were possible to conduct an identical study independently (Babbie, 2013). Threats to dependability are that the phenomena under observation may be continually changing, the act of investigating may affect the phenomena in question, or the researcher may exert unintended influence over the interviewee (Babbie, 2013; Miller & Glassner, 2016; Yin, 2014). Following a semi-structured research guide, interviews were conducted in a neutral location; interviewees selected a location that was comfortable, I met them on their terms. I followed the research guide's introductory comments and initial theme-based questions, topics for follow-up questions, and concluding remarks (Babbie, 2013; Miller &

Glassner, 2016; Seidman, 2006; Yin, 2014). The semi-structured research guide mitigated threats to dependability.

I considered three threats to validity, investigator influence, the investigator being changed by the investigative experience, and investigator being swayed by emotional connection to subjects (Patton, 2000). Patton (2000) stated that habitual patterns and cultures are not easily influenced. While investigator presence may have a short-term effect on behaviors, that effect will not be lasting. The most important element that guards against this threat is establishing a safe, non-retributinal relationship between researchers and their subjects. Establishing and following a research guide helped to guard against being swayed through emotional connection. Lastly, Patton (2000) advised researchers to practice “empathetic neutrality” (p. 1204), which means to maintain impartiality even in the midst of empathizing with subjects. Empathetic neutrality required clear recognition of researchers’ own bias and a concerted effort to remain neutral.

### **Expected Findings**

Researchers have studied transitional engagement programs and established that freshmen function in a network, and that internal and external forces impact students’ desire to persist in higher education (Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Pike et al., 2011; Turner, 2016; Turner & Thompson, 2014; Vergara, 2012). Researchers have also discovered circumstances in which institutional transition strategies and traditions seem to diminish student engagement or create divisiveness, resulting in the emergence of enclaves or safe spaces. Circumstances seem to require students to bond together in homophilic groups. Individuals derive strength through belonging; that strength serves to overcome failure or to bolster resiliency (Benn, 2002; Duggan & Williams, 2010; Hickenbottom-Braun & Burns, 2015; Permzadian & Credé, 2015). My

expectation was that this research would give voice to students' experience of the freshman transition. Further, I expected that the student voice would serve to fill the gap in institutional understanding of the why and how students connect to an institution and why and/or how that connection (institutional fit) plays a role in a students' resolve to persist in higher education. I intentionally established an open coding process to allow for themes to emerge naturally, rather than to force results into an established framework.

### **Ethical Issues**

**Conflict of interest.** I was a member of the faculty at University XYZ, the location of the study. I conducted this research to further understanding of the freshman transitional experience. While I hope that the results benefit freshman engagement at University XYZ and other similar universities, I was in no way bound by University XYZ to conduct my research in this area of study. I excluded my current students from this study.

**Researcher's position.** A researcher must consider personal bias and take steps to mitigate such bias (Babbie, 2013; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Yin, 2014). Engagement strategies at many institutions are influenced, to a great degree, by economic decisions (Hickinbottom-Braun & Burns, 2015). Ideally, engagement should be about student growth and success. Institutional economic benefit should be a side effect of excellent engagement. Education, while supporting future career expectations, should have value in and of itself and be seen as such. The research guide and thematic analysis are in place to protect against researcher bias and reduce researcher influence. Opening interview questions were worded specifically to eliminate the act of leading or misleading the interviewee (Babbie, 2013, Seidman, 2003). The additional topics and probing questions within each category were designed to ensure full coverage of important ideas, thus



reducing the amount of guiding provided during the interview (Babbie, 2013; Ritchie & Lewis, 2013; Yin, 2014).

**Ethical issues in the study.** Primary ethical considerations are to appropriately care for the participants and to ensure that no coercion or misguiding occurs. A letter of consent served to inform participants of their rights and the basic requirements of the study. All participants were well aware of the voluntary nature of this study. The voluntary nature of the study was echoed within the research guide. The research guide and invitation to participate were designed to alleviate any concern of reprisal or detriment for candid speech and thereby created a safe study environment. The construct of this study presented minimal potential harm to the participants. All study materials are being kept in a fire proof locked cabinet and will remain so for a period of three years following the completion of the study, after which all study materials will be destroyed. Protocols were in place to protect participant confidentiality. Pseudonyms and alpha-numeric identifiers were used to protect participant identity and transcripts were sanitized to remove potentially identifying material. I will not release any participant information and will protect all information that is obtained through the study.

## **Summary**

This chapter contains an outline of the research process and a justification for my choice of an embedded case study. Embedded cases were selected to understand the diverse perspective of some distinct sub-groups within the freshman class. The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory, embedded, single-case study, conducted at a mid-sized private university in the Pacific Northwest, was to understand how freshmen perceive institutional engagement strategies. Specifically, to unpack the how and/or why connection (institutional fit) plays a role in supporting freshman student resiliency. Further, I intended to identify why some students

perceive institutional engagement strategies as connective while others view the same strategies as divisive. Chapter 4 includes a description of the findings of the data gathered from the institutional documents and interviews. Chapter 5 contains a synthesis of the student voice and a presentation of the results with contextual reference.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

### Introduction

This study's results highlight how students experience the freshman transition and serve to fill the gap in institutional understanding of why connection plays a role in supporting student resiliency. Institutions of higher education will be able to use these results to develop a better understanding of the actual effect of engagement and transitional strategies. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are rearticulated here to facilitate elucidation of the results.

**Problem statement.** Students drop out of higher education for a variety of reasons, many of which are unrelated to institutional influence. Nonetheless, one significant factor in students' resiliency is their perceived connection to peers and to their institution (D'Lima, Winsler, & Kitsantas, 2014; Turner, 2016). Connection is a factor within the span of institutional influence. The problem is that institutions do not know the effect of students' perception of institutional engagement strategies, the role engagement strategies play in building connection, nor the actual role connection plays on a student's resiliency or resolve to persist in higher education.

**Purpose statement.** The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory, embedded, single-case study, conducted at a mid-sized private university in the Pacific Northwest, is to understand how freshmen perceive institutional engagement strategies. Specifically, to unpack why connection (institutional fit) plays a role in supporting freshman student resiliency. Further, this study will identify why some students perceive institutional engagement strategies as connective while others view the same strategies as divisive. Achieving these goals could help higher education

institutions gain better understanding of the actual effect of engagement and transitional strategies.

### **Research Questions**

- RQ 1: How do freshmen students perceive institutional engagement strategies?
- RQ 2: Why does connection (institutional fit) play a role in a student's resolve to persist in higher education?

Chapter 2 reviewed current, relevant literature to establish both the gap in the research and conceptual framework. The conceptual framework for this study of freshman perception of institutional engagement and academic support lies in the seamless weaving of the theory of separation, theory of integration, relational cultural theory (RCT), student support, and stress inoculation (Lenz, Holman, Lancaster, & Gotay, 2013; Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1987). Turner and Thompson (2014) highlighted four themes that freshmen identified as most influential: “freshmen focused activities, developing effective study skills, instructor-student relationship, and academic advisements-support” (p. 103). External and internal stimuli can influence each of these indicators. Institutions can control some aspects of external influence and recognize the connected nature of human interactions.

Within Chapter 3 one will find the structure and framework of this study. Presented as an outline of the research process, Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of data collection and analysis. The author discusses qualitative research methodologies and justifies the choice of an embedded case study. Also, discussed within Chapter 3 are limitations and ethical considerations germane to the study.

This chapter reports the results of a review of institutional documentation germane to freshmen student interviews. Freshman student interviews revealed the importance of belonging

to, being a part of, or connecting to a community. Interviews revealed student perceptions of engagements, for some connective and for some, divisive. Institutional documentation revealed the institutional intent to influence connection, support academic success, and relieve transitional stress. This investigation revealed institutional engagement strategies that influence connection (both positive and negative) and the role that connection played in these students' resiliency.

### **Description of the Sample**

The purposive sample yielded a comprehensive set of voices, each voice brought unique perspective to the study. Throughout the sample selection process, the study invited 75 students to participate, 14 students agreed, however three participants missed their interview appointment and then refused to reschedule. That left 11 participants, all of whom were comfortable meeting on campus for the interview. Demographic analysis of the sample indicated that all intended subcases were represented within the sample. While there were overlapping characteristics; each voice added its own depth and breadth to the researcher's understanding of the freshman perspective.

Table 3

#### *Study Demographic Totals*

Demographic category	Male	Female	Totals
Christian	3	6	9
Other religion	0	2	2
International	1	1	2
Academic Stress	1	2	3
Racial/Ethnic Minorities	2	5	7
- Black	1	3	4
- Hispanic	1	1	2
- Asian	1	1	2
First Generation	2	3	5
Total Participants	3	8	11

Participant eagerness varied, two participants entered the interview willing but somewhat reluctant. Four participants were eager to tell their story, while the remaining were somewhere on the continuum in between. Table 4-2, presented below, contains demographic data of the participant pool. Connection to participants is maintained through the use of participant numbers. Throughout this work reference to quotes and ideas will be connected to student's participant number.

Table 4

*Detailed Study Demographics*

Pseudonym (Participant Number)	Ethnicity	Race	Academic Stress	First Gen	Religion
<b>Female</b>					
Kate (4)	Non-Hispanic	Black			Catholic
Ada (9)	Non-Hispanic	Black			Christian Church
Teri (10)	Non-Hispanic	Black	Yes	Yes	Christian Church
Brandi (3)	Non-Hispanic	White	Yes		Atheist/ Agnostic
Donna (5)	Non-Hispanic	White			Evangelical Free
Pat (6)	Non-Hispanic	White			Presbyterian
Sara (11)	Non-Hispanic	White/Asian		Yes	Islam
Lois (8)	Hispanic	White		Yes	Christian Church
<b>Male</b>					
Fred (1)	Non-Hispanic	Black			Catholic
Dom (7)	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific		Yes	Christian Church
Dan (2)	Non-Hispanic	White	Yes	Yes	Catholic

To preserve confidentiality of the study setting; names for actual institutional documents and their URLs are not included. The following table lists each document with a pseudonymic title and brief description of the document. All documents were provided to students via the university's web pages. Throughout the rest of this report, quotes from these documents will be cited as a personal communication, using the document number and/or title.

Table 5

*Institutional Documents*

Study Document	Content
Doc 1: Course requirements	This document contains a description of all required foundational courses and General Educational requirements
Doc 2: Diversity, Equity & Inclusion	This document contains an overview of the diversity and inclusion programs and goals for the university.
Doc 3: First Year Guide	This document contains requirements and advice for one's first year; from move-in, through first and second semesters, and on to spring.
Doc 4: Registration Guide	This web-based interactive document guides new freshmen through the registration process. It is meant to be applied under the guidance of a faculty advisor.
Doc 5: InitiTradition History	This document is a history of the development of InitiTradition. It is the university's only reference to this student led university supported transitional activity.
Doc 6: Orientation Guide	This document contains all information necessary for fall orientation. It includes a detailed schedule of required and optional events during orientation week, as well as points of contact for the first semester.
Doc 7: Mission and History	This document contains a brief history of the institution and the mission and vision statements.

**Research Methodology and Analysis**

This qualitative, exploratory, embedded, single-case study, conducted at a mid-sized private university in the Pacific Northwest, served to fill a gap in institutional understanding of how freshmen perceive institutional engagement strategies. Case study analysis was specifically chosen to unpack the how connection played a role in supporting freshman student resiliency. Further, the study served to identify why some students perceive institutional engagement strategies as connective while others may view the same strategies as divisive. Data analysis was

an iterative process of deep reading, coding, coalescing codes into themes, identifying thematic relationships, reexamining data, developing further coding, and repeating. It was helpful to organize codes into co-occurrence tables and to visualize connections within networks, see Appendix B.

Data for the study is comprised of interview recordings; notes, transcripts, and institutional documents provide color and context to the data. In-situ study of documents provided contextual understanding necessary to infer institutional intent, as either overtly described or inferred within the document. Institutional documents provided background information and a framework for understanding of the intended institution-student relationship from the institutional perspective. University XYZ offers many engagements that were not mentioned in student interviews, for purposes of this study I reserved comments for those engagements that students identified within their interviews. The intent was not to critique engagement strategies or to provide an assessment of effectiveness, but rather to examine consistencies and contradictions between institutional intentions and freshman perceptions.

While exploring interview transcripts, codes emerged and provided clarity to student perceptions. Through network visualization, codes coalesced into related themes. It became apparent that it would be beneficial to break up the transitional year into three zones of contact. Engagement strategies within each zone seemed to serve a particular purpose related to the transitional journey. Broadly speaking, institutional engagement served to intersect with perspective students or new freshmen with the intent of influencing connection, supporting academic success, or relieving transitional stress/anxiety. Within each zone of contact specific engagements were identified by participants as having either a positive or negative impact on their transitional year.



The first zone, spring-summer engagement, encompassed all contacts or points of intersection between the university and perspective students preceding arrival on campus. College fairs, High School visits, informational mailings or social media posts, informal and formal campus visits, music and athletic tryouts, and scholarship competitions, are all examples of this type of engagement. Student participants identified four specific engagements that were influential in their decision to attend University XYZ. Participants identified informal alumni contact, formal and informal campus visits, contact with a faculty member and/or staff, and social media connection as influential.

Move-in engagements, are both formal and informal, they serve to facilitate the move-in experience, orient students to campus community, and transition students into the university. Orientation, campus job fairs, activity forums, initiations, informational sessions, meals, celebrations, and rituals like Fall Convocation all fit this category. Student participants identified the move-in day experience, orientation, InitiTradition, and student life activities as influential within the first three weeks of school.

Part of the move-in engagements include special programs to engage students with particular responsibilities or people groups with particular needs. Pre-move-in engagements are connective programs that allow students to move-in to the dorms early, before the masses all arrive on campus. Athletic teams with fall competitive seasons use a pre-move-in strategy to get the team ready for the season. Some scholarship programs, diversity bridging programs, and international student programs bring students on campus early. Ostensibly, these programs are designed to improve access, relieve transitional stress, foster connection, and create a sense of belonging. Student participants spoke specifically about athletic teams, diverse student population, and international student pre-move-in engagements.

First semester engagement comprises the remainder of the first semester, including first year seminar, advising meetings, student success team, intercultural connections, clubs, teams, evening speakers, academic classes, food services, and other formal and informal points of contact. Most of the student participant observations came from three broad categories of engagement, Student Life (dorms, Resident Directors, roommates), Academic stress (classes, faculty, student success, study habits), and Diversity and Inclusion initiatives (Intercultural Center, Multicultural events, and student life).

Institution-student intersections, impacted student participants' lives with either a positive or negative influence. After exploring institutional engagement, student perceptions were investigated. Holistic analysis uncovered context for emergent patterns and constructed a composite understanding of the freshman perception. Separate similar analysis unpacked perceptions revealed within each embedded case. Lastly, a cross-case analysis identified themes of commonality and disparity between the perception of the predominant student population and that of the various subgroups. What follows is a summary of the findings, without undue interpretation, the results section contains analysis and comparison, Chapter 5 is reserved for discussion of the results in relationship to the existing literature and author's conclusions.

### **Summary of the Findings**

**Summarized institutional intent.** Institutional documentation revealed four primary intentions behind University XYZ's engagements, to foster access and connection, demonstrate value for individuals, support the transition to college, and support academic success. According to Doc 2: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, University XYZ is committed to develop a learning community that values diversity, encourages disparate view points and respectful conversation, and values people of diverse backgrounds. University XYZ's dedication to fostering access and

connection is evidenced by meticulous engagement with perspective students, from the first contact through acceptance, to registration, applicants are treated as if each one matters.

Application to University XYZ was and still is free for all applicants, thereby improving access.

One example of an engagement that is individually tailored, is that of campus visits. While there are targeted programs that orchestrate overnight campus visits for specific groups like, honors students or ethnic/racial minority students, any student can schedule a campus visit. Visits are personalized in that students may choose what they see and what classes they visit.

During the spring and summer before the first semester, University XYZ engages each student multiple times. Through student housing application perspective students request housing and establish a roommate profile. Students interested in music (not just music majors) are encouraged to audition for ensembles and for scholarship consideration. Campus visits, social media campaigns, and group chats serve to answer questions, build relationships and alleviate transitional stress. Individually tailored registration process connects students with a faculty advisors to build their fall schedule and prepare for the step into college. University XYZ purposely strives to be accessible, to build relationship, foster connection, alleviate transitional stress and set students up for academic success.

Some targeted groups are invited to participate in pre-move-in programs. Athletes, international students, first generation, and UREP students each have specific programs that address group goals and needs. These groups experience unique stress at the start of the school year, pre-move-in programs serve to ease that stress. While each program has specific goals, they all foster peer-to-peer relationship, familiarize students with campus, and create social connection. The bridges program brings students from diverse backgrounds to campus early,

UREP and first generation students are invited to participate. The result is that students will not have to navigate the first weeks of college solo, but they will have a peer network for support.

University XYZ engages all students with similar strategies beginning with move-in day and moving on through orientation to the first day of classes. Doc 6: Orientation Guide, lays out the schedule and intent for orientation. Orientation is presented as an interweaving of informational gatherings, meetings with advisors, student social connections, student competitions, events, and rituals that serve to usher freshmen into college culture. Doc 5: InitiTradition History, provides students with a general understanding of this student led transitional tradition. InitiTradition is a central part of orientation week, designed to push students out of their comfort zone, to build relationships, and foster connection.

As the academic semester begins, the social frenzy that marks the start of the school year draws to a close and students are expected to adjust their time management and social calendars to place appropriate priority on academics. Doc 3: First Year Guide, unpacks significant events throughout the first year. According to the First-Year Guide, engagements continue to foster connection but also add in academic support. Student life continues with connective and supportive programs, clubs step in to create points of connection, resident directors support student social stress that comes with adjustment to the new community.

A student at University XYZ is not left to navigate the academic waters on his or her own, but there is a framework of support meant to ease the transition and assist as a student takes charge of the experience. This mindset is evident in Doc 4: The Registration Guide, here students are encouraged to take personal responsibility for the upcoming semester. Everything is provided to help students prepare in advance for the registration appointment. The guide makes it clear that each student is to be the author of her own path and that a professor will journey with

him or her and provide advice for consideration. Students are empowered to take the lead. Through orientation, a student is presented with information on the writing commons, tutoring center and the role of his academic advisor. Along-side these supports, title IX rights and responsibilities as well as opportunities for accommodations for documented needs are laid out. It is apparent that University XYZ wants students to know that they are not on a solo journey.

Special programs engage diverse people groups, the intercultural center serves as a connecting point for both international students and for UREP students. Doc 2: Diversity, Equity, and Equity, articulates 20 different multicultural clubs and programs that illustrate University XYZ's efforts to grow to become a more diverse learning community. One example of multicultural engagement, the diversity monologues, gives voice to personal experience, ethnic life stories, and offers a place of honor and value for those stories. Doc 1: Course requirements, makes it clear that University XYZ expects faculty to work to create space for safe conversation within the structure of academic courses, indicating that the university is dedicated to valuing disparate points of view while engaging in courageous conversation. Doc 7: Mission and History, establishes University XYZ as a Christian Liberal Arts university; a place where students from any faith background are welcome, where disparate points of view are honored and everyone belongs. Word pictures along and photos within documentation paint a picture that University XYZ strives to be a vibrant learning community, an amalgamation of ethnically, racially, experientially, and spiritually diverse learners.

**Holistic student perspectives.** This section outlines the student perspective of the transitional experience as a holistic group. Participant stories are amalgamated to give the reader a sense of the lived experience. Participant interviews started with relationship building, researcher and participant getting to know one another, a shared cup of coffee, and some

background understanding served to usher in an environment of safe conversation. Some participants appeared skeptical, some eager, each with his or her own story. Participants expected a long list of specific questions, each was at least a little bit uncomfortable with simply telling his or her story. The intent was to guide as little as possible and allow student's perceptions to flow naturally out of the influential experiences that each chose to share.

The research guide moved students through the transitional year. Most participants chose to begin with acceptance, journey through move-in day, and then to the first semester experience. For some participants, relationship with University XYZ began months or maybe years before application.

***Spring/summer experience.*** Legacy students, and students with a connection to an alum all reported that the alumni's endorsement fostered connection. Whether it was the student's desire to have what was witnessed in the alum's life, or simply that a trusted relationship endorsed the university, the reported perception was one of hopeful belonging and positive connection. Growing up, Participant 5 knew, that her uncle, a teacher, went to University XYZ, her current youth pastor is also an alum. Participant 5 stated that those relationships influenced her to choose University XYZ. Participant 5 stated that she heard about University XYZ from an alum. That alum's closest friends were made at University XYZ, they have been a friend group for over 30 years, that is what Participant 5 wants. She chose University XYZ, seeking long-term meaningful peer relationships.

For other participants, the relationship functionally began with the acceptance letter. From acceptance to move-in day participants reported multiple points of contact; each exerting influence. Reports of this time period were overwhelming positive. Engagements as simple as a birthday card, an email about registration, or a Facebook post all encouraged connection and

were perceived as such. In about half of the comments about spring/summer engagements, participants spoke about visits to the university. Some visits were student initiated, while others were invitational events sponsored by University XYZ. Participants perceived that the visits fostered connection and presented the student with the idea that he or she belonged at University XYZ.

Participant 7 remarked that the multicultural visit convinced him that University XYZ would not be like his local high school, and therefore it was worthy of consideration. The visit presented the picture that University XYZ “was like, wow, this is really diverse” (Participant 7, personal communication, April 6, 2017). University XYZ would be a place to which he could connect and find a way to belong. It was during that visit that Participant 7 met his roommate, Participant 7 credits his roommate with getting him through the first semester. This sense of belonging permeated his first semester, when faced with academic and social challenges Participant 7’s positive peer relationship, his place in the family so to speak, emboldened him to soldier on. “I don’t know if I would have made it . . . if not for my roommate” (Participant 7, personal communication). Participant 10 was convinced that she wanted to attend a diverse school and University XYZ is only about 25% diverse. However, her multi-culturally themed visit to University XYZ revealed that here, there was value for diversity within the institution.

While diversity was low in comparison to some other urban college settings, the inclusive culture made up for it and convinced her that she belonged. Participant 10 had a very negative roommate experience with her overnight visit to the university, still the tour, classes and programmatic structure of the visit made up for the negative experience and gave Participant 10 a sense of belonging and connection. For Participant 4, an international student, it was the intercultural center that tipped the scale. During her visit, the Intercultural Center was the go to

place of comfort and answers. It was here, with the staff, that Participant 4 found authentic relationships and perceived that she belonged.

Participant 8 and Participant 9 found a place to belong through the process of music auditions. Set up as a scholarship opportunity, the audition process is not necessarily meant to build a relationship, for these two it did. Participant 9 (April 10, 2017) came to be a music major and remarks “I think the music director really had a huge impact on my decision” (Participant 9, personal communication). The music director made a strong faculty-to-student connection that influenced Participant 9, convinced her that she belonged. Participant 8 (April 10, 2017) on the other hand has declared a major that is not related to music, but remarks of the scholarship competition that it was both “intimidating . . . [and] . . . incredible” (Participant 8, personal communication). Participant 8 was motivated to attend, in part, because of this encounter, she felt like she belonged. Participant 8 indicated that her visit and the chance to experience a class was influential as well. “I got to sit in on a professor’s class—that was absolutely fabulous” (Participant 8, personal communication). Again faculty-to-student connection played a positive role in a student perceiving that she belonged.

Athletic recruiting led to connections as well. Scouting, tryouts and communications between coaches, potential teammates. Standing on the field, running with the team produced a feeling of belonging and encouraged Participant 5 and Participant 2 to commit. Participant 5 went on to compete and intends to continue throughout her university experience. Even though Participant 2 ultimately did not make the team the experience proved to be connective at least at the time.

Students described spring/summer engagements as overwhelmingly connective. Each student regardless of ethnic/racial background or family’s socio-economic status, perceived



connection and felt a sense of belonging. Targeted engagement programs painted a favorable picture of the campus climate. Students perceived that University XYZ was an academic community, enriched through the arts, athletics, and special interests; comprised of an interwoven tapestry of diverse peoples, sharing ideas, sharing life, and growing together.

***Move-in experience.*** As students showed up for move in day, past perceptions and expectations collided with reality. Most students reported an initial sense of isolation, however engagement strategies influenced students from the get go. Participant 1 (April 4, 2017) expressed his perception of isolation thusly, “I just felt like I didn’t have any friends. I was surrounded by people but I didn’t feel close to them” (Participant 1, personal communication). Other students shared similar sentiment. Five students were invited to campus for early move-in programs. Each reported that these programs were connective. Participant 5, an athlete, felt the connection grow throughout the two-week early move in. The connection with her coach, fostered earlier in the year during the recruiting process, now grew to include the team. Participant 10 and Participant 7 both participated in the bridges program, an early move-in program designed for UREP and first generation students. Participant 10 (April 13, 2017) perceived the early move-in to be connective, “I guess that was good, it got me ready to start the year, got me more familiar with the program and like the school. I met a lot more people” (Participant 10, personal communication). Participant 1 and Participant 4 both moved in with the other international students. This head start, fostered relationship with the other international students and served to connect them with the university. The Intercultural Center (IC) provided the hub for these connections. Participant 4 remarks that the IC is still the place where she feels most connected to the university. Participant 1 perceived this experience as connective as well.

Participant 1 (March 3, 2017) remarked “I felt, wow, Americans are nice, you know? I was stoked . . .” (Participant 1, personal communication).

The other six showed up with the masses on move in day. Participant 5 (April 4, 2017) remarked “once everybody else showed up, it just seemed loud, busy” (Participant 5, personal communication). All seemed to be seeking authentic relationships and finding a place to fit in. All students experienced the same orientation, and were ushered into community through a series experiences and rituals. Participants discussed the orientation sessions and Inititradition as one of the predominate influences of this time period. It was at this point in the interviews that many narratives turned from completely positive to some negative perceptions of the transitional experience.

Perceptions of Inititradition were polarized, either positive or negative but not much in between. Participant 11 and her roommate decided to take the university by storm and fully participate. “I just got to put myself out there . . . so my roommate and I stuck together and went about and we made it our goal to introduce ourselves to as many people . . .” (Participant 11, personal communication, April 18, 2017). Participant 9 found orientation to be empowering, “It was so exciting, really (nervousing)” (Participant 9, personal communication, April 10, 2017), she found new life in setting her own curfew, setting her own priorities. Participant 5 liked the community that formed, “I did pick up on the that community sense immediately” (Participant 5, personal communication, April 4, 2017).

Not every student found orientation to be positive. Some students found the activities to be exhausting, they felt that they could not keep up with the social events and the required orientation meetings. “I did not participate in [InitiTradition], I was so tired out by [bridges] program” (Participant 10, personal communication, April 13, 2017).” Others were just put off by

the experience, perceiving events to be puerile. Participant 4 felt isolated during Inititradition “because everybody was out doing things and I didn’t really feel like I wanted to do that kind of stuff” (Participant 4, personal communication, March 14, 2017). Participant 3 (March 7, 2017) perceived that the Inititradition experience seemed inauthentic. “There’s a lot of opportunities but for me it feels very orchestrated, hey, make friends, make friends and that’s very like, AHHH, to me” (Participant 3, personal communication). Participant 1 (March 3, 2017) perceived isolation “I kind of felt alone. Lots of people knew my name . . . but no one really knew me” (Participant 1, personal communication). Participant 11 (April 18, 2017) a commuter, did not feel comfortable enough to participate in the social side, “I could’ve joined any dorms and commuted, but I didn’t wanna” (Participant 11, personal communication).

***First semester experience.*** As the semester progressed students reported positive perceptions of resident advisors (RA), professors and advisors. Perceptions of academic support teams were mixed. Students recognized the value and need for academic accommodations and interventions, but pride made it hard to accept. When offered accommodations, Participant 7 (April 6, 2017) stated that “I didn’t want to . . . I felt like . . . I was cheating myself” ultimately he accepted help and found that the academic success team just wanted to see students succeed (Participant 7, personal communication). Participant 3 viewed the notice that she was failing as negative and was too prideful to seek help. It took until second semester for her to begin to look to advisors and seek academic support.

General Education (GE) and Core courses contributed to students’ perceptions of futility. Students perceive GE courses to be credit fillers, courses without purpose. Students are advised to get into major courses as soon as possible, noting that GE courses can fit in anywhere. Some students were counseled to take particular GE classes at a community college, indicating that the

GE courses at University XYZ had no peculiar value. Students that are concerned about the rising cost of college are not motivated to simply fill credits, but rather perceive that every class should contribute to the end goal.

Social issues punctuated academic stress. Participant 4 initially thought her single room was wonderful, but soon found that it left her isolated from the rest of campus. Participant 1, after a month of conflicts with his roommate expressed feelings of liberation when his roommate left the dorm. Friend groups emerged and students reflected on networks of connection. In general, this sample of students did not perceive the campus to be ethnically/racially intermixed but rather, eight of the participants described his or her friend group as homogeneous. Three participants did describe friend groups as racially intermixed, both Participant 8 and Participant 9, each of mixed racial background, have found themselves in a friend group that includes other students of mixed race. Both perceive that as a diverse group, however, in some respects these are homogeneous groups in similar ways that other friend groups are described. Participant 10 describes a friend group that includes pacific islanders, Hispanic, Japanese and white students. All the other students described friend groups in homogeneous terms, students of color tended to remain separate from white students. Participant 4 (April 14, 2017) perceived separation and isolation “so, I feel like I should have had more of a chance to meet other students—American students and not [just] international students” (Participant 4, personal communication).

Students reflected on initial academic success, peer relationships and the culture of the campus. Issues of diversity and inclusion took the forefront of student observations. Students perceived contradictions between what they experienced leading up to first semester and what they experienced during the academic year. Engagements that were perceived as positive early on now were perceived as barriers to belonging, students perceived a sort of structural separation

within the community. Students' deeply held pre-judgements began to surface as each reflected on diverse group settings, both formal and informal. While all students remarked that they felt safe on campus, each highlighted places or circumstances where they could not be themselves or did not feel as if they belonged.

Each student reflected on first semester challenges and remarked about how they overcame and why they persisted to the second semester. Participant 10 felt like she needed to change her major. Participant 2 wanted to get back on top of poor first semester academic performance. Participant 7 was finding his way. Participant 1 came all the way from Africa, against his parent's wishes, he felt he had to persist. Participant 8 can't imagine being anywhere else, Participant 11 has her eyes fixed on the career at the end, University is just the journey. Participant 3 did not feel like she belonged, but stayed out of obedience. Participant 9 has found that her connection with the music department has persisted and that emboldened her resilience. Participant 5 is in her element, she feels like she is a perfect fit for University XYZ. Participant 6's relationship with her RA made all the difference, led her to persist and set her eyes on student life leadership.

**Sub-group perspectives.** While perspectives overlapped myriad sub-group identities. It is notable that there was disparity of perception within the aggregated UREP category. Specifically, African American student perspectives differed from other racial/ethnic subgroups and from International Black student perspectives. Participant 1 (March 3, 2017) found it disconcerting that peers, faculty, and staff all felt it necessary to educate him on his personal response to bias or prejudice. His perspective was that to be at an American university was an honor. He does not want to be controlled by the actions of others, so he holds to a perspective

that social behaviors and individual actions were of little consequence. Table 4-4 depicts a comparison of perspectives across various demographic groups within the study.

Table 6

*Comparisons of general perceptions by demographic groups*

Perspectives	African American Perspective	UREP other than African American	International Black	White
On institutional treatment of students.	Expressed an expectation of special consideration.	Impressed by institutional efforts to build connection.	Assumed no special status	Assumed all students were treated the same.
On community identity.	Expressed value in personal identity.	Expressed value in being part of the university community.	Honored to be part of the community at an American University	Perceived the community to include all members.
On Campus events	Felt excluded or uninvited, unless the event was designated as specifically African American or multi-cultural.	Put off by events that appeared exclusive, or did not seem designed for full campus participation.	Expectation that they would learn from experiencing American Culture in various forms.	Excluded, uninvited, to multi-cultural events. Comfortable attending for class requirement.
On diverse groupings	View that diversity included all perspectives. However, viewed, White perspective as diminishing diversity.	View diversity as people contributing disparate views, regardless of race/ethnicity.	Valued White student perspective as part of the diverse voice.	See discussion below.
On ethnic/racial interconnectedness	Accepted being a separate group, indicated either a desire to be separate or that racial separation was inevitable.	Viewed campus as not interconnected however, desired connection; dismayed by separation.	Wanted to be interconnected with the whole of the campus.	See discussion below.

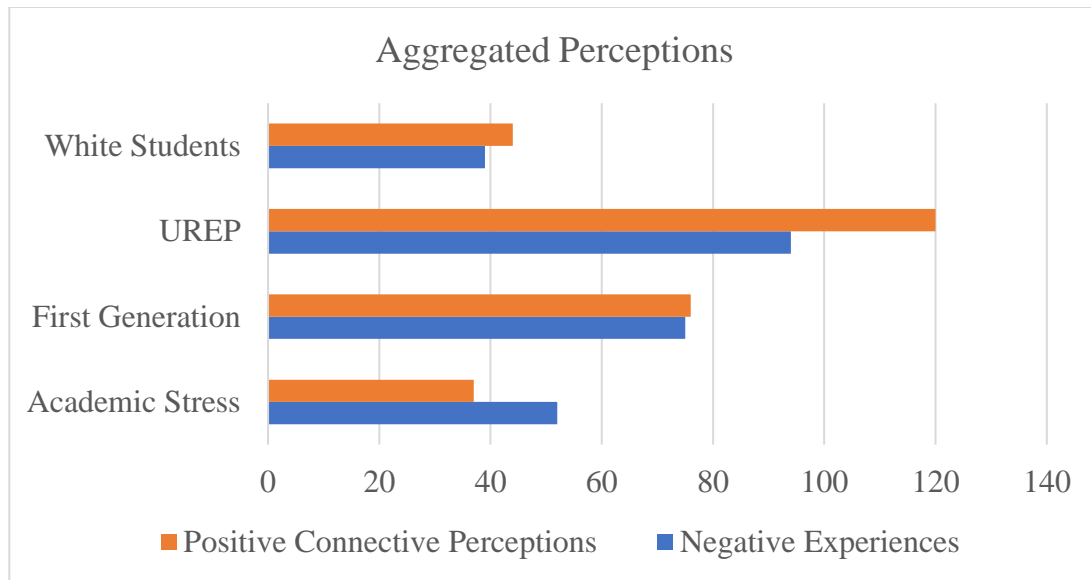
White student perspectives of diverse groupings and ethnic/racial interconnectedness varied greatly. Participant 5 (April 4, 2017) seemed to see no particular value in diversity at all,

while Participant 6 (April 4, 2017) put high value in racially/ethnically diverse groupings. Participant 3 (March 7, 2017), defined a diverse group as one where students expressed viewpoints that were counter-establishment, societally normative perspectives were not considered to be part of a diverse group perspective. Participant 2 (March 7, 2017) felt excluded from diverse settings. From the perspective that different people groups perceived circumstances differently, what follows is an analysis of the collected data and eventually a comparison of perception and institutional intent.

### **Presentation of the Data and Results**

Nodal analysis of interviews and associated themes identified points of intersection which eventually coalesced into four broad perceptions spanning the entirety of the transitional year. Participants' interpretations of interactions and institutional engagements served to build an understanding of student perceptions. Figure 1 indicates relative frequency of quotes from each of the sub-group reference positive and negative perceptions. The relative frequencies indicate that all sub-groups have more positive perceptions than negative. When dis-aggregated, students that are on the academic watch list or on probation had a greater degree of negative experiences. A word of caution, with an *N* of only 11 the relative occurrence counts on charts and tables that follow simply serve as pointers, directing exploration of the quotes within these categories. Within each chart, the normalized occurrence numbers represent only relative occurrence.





*Figure 1. Aggregated Perceptions*

Exploring aggregated codes across participant groups and analyzing nodal connections between positive and negative perceptions led to the following findings.

1. Authentic engagement produces a sense of connection. Student perception of connection is fostered when students perceive authentic relationship and reality fits with institutionally communicated intentions.
2. Engagement that contradicts reality produces mistrust. Student perception of falseness results when students feel betrayed by what they believed to be true. Participants identified some engagements that produced a false sense of the culture of the community and thus students perceived them as divisive.
3. Engagement that targets a specific group leads to a perception of structural segregation. Student perception of separation was attributed in part to structural segregation. Students perceived that some institutional engagement strategies contribute to structural segregation. Strategies designed to foster connection or

belonging to a specific people group, unintentionally came to be barriers to interracial connections throughout the campus community.

4. Circumstantially constrained. Student perception of helplessness: Students perceived some negative experiences to be beyond personal control. Academic stress, ethnic/racial tension seemed to be inevitable, student attitude was essentially that the stressor would always be there and nothing could be done to effect change.

**Perception of connection.** The network depicted in Figure 2 was built by analyzing the points of intersection or nodes found in the code analysis of interview quotes.

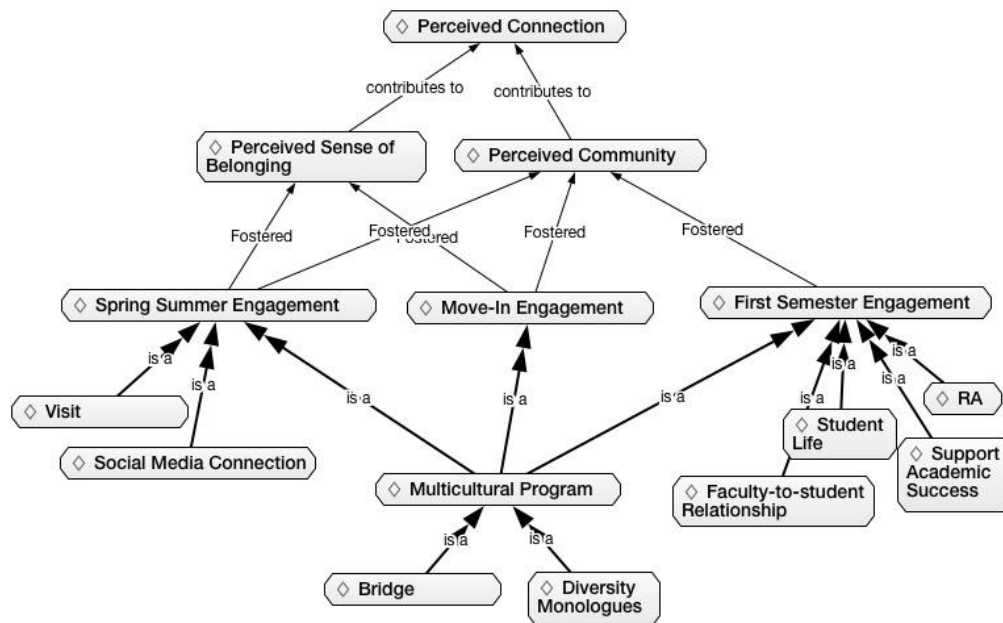


Figure 2. Nodes that contrive to produce connection

Students highlighted engagements that made them feel valued, that connected them with peers, faculty, and staff. Not all engagements led to persistence of the positive perception. An engagement had staying power if it was perceived to be authentic, that is the engagement was consistent with the lived experience that followed. Connective engagements that proved to be inconsistent with the lived experience were perceived as false or divisive.

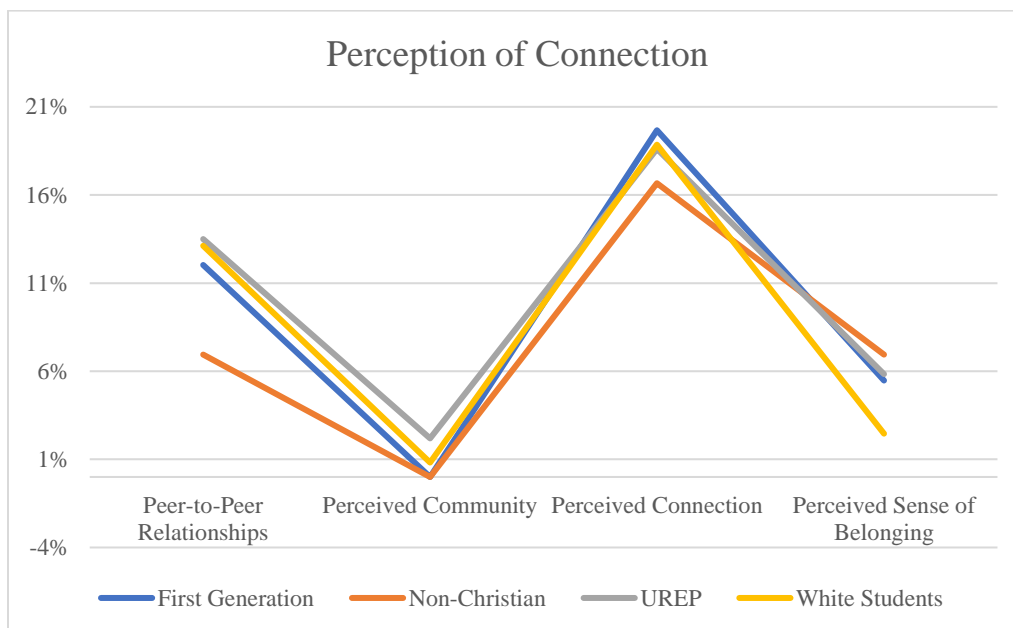


Figure 3. Perception of Connection

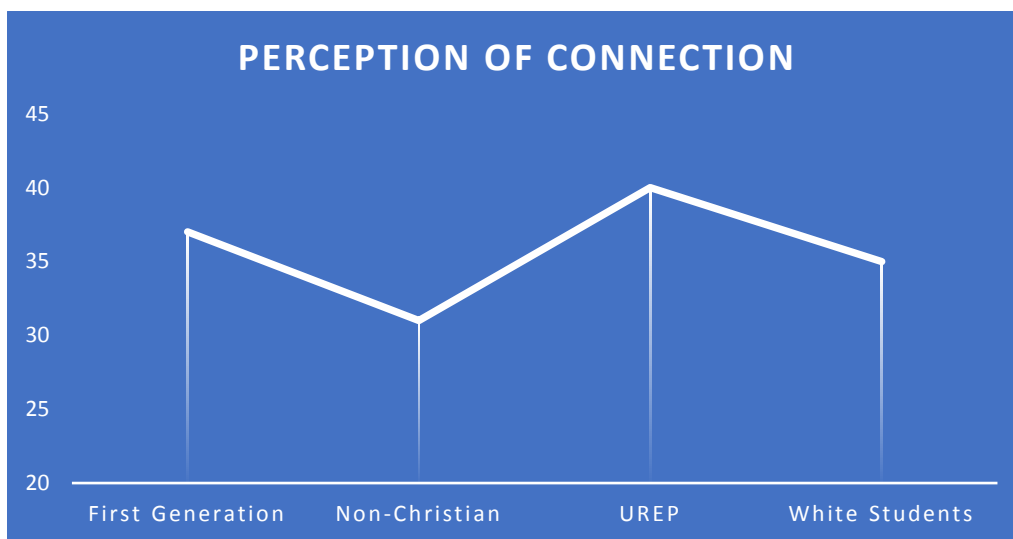


Figure 4. Perception of Connection Aggregated

All students perceived connection to be an important factor in both selection and resiliency. Data in table 4.6 suggests that establishing good peer-to-peer relationships was identified as important across all demographics. Table 4.7 aggregates all codes that contribute to connection. The data indicates that first generation and UREP students were more likely to

comment on a connective engagement strategies than were white students. Non-Christian and white students commented with similar frequency. Every UREP student had participated in some form of targeted recruitment. Multi-cultural visits, international student engagement, and early move-in all produced the institutionally intended results in terms of freshman perception. UREP students paid attention, felt valued, and found a place to belong. Four of the UREP students stated that these connective engagements were the primary reason that they chose to attend University XYZ.

**Perception of falseness.** Falseness occurs when students perceive a contradiction between institution claims and the lived experienced. Analysis in this area examined quotes and comments from within codes that contributed to connection juxtaposed with codes that contributed to disconnection, division and other negative perceptions. Table 4-8 shows codes that contained positive perceptions along the top, with codes that contained a negative perception along the side. Nodes with numbers greater than zero, indicate co-occurrence of positive and negative codes within a quote. Figure 5 depicts quotes that spoke to a positive engagement strategy or intent, and also to a negative perception. Positive faculty-to-student connection, valuing disparate views, and safe conversation are codes contained within perceived connection. Students commented on feeling safe, within class settings, to share personal perspective. Participant 10 shared a negative experience with classroom discussion.

Table 7

*Code Co-Occurrence Nodes Part 1*

	Affirmation	Ethnic/Racial interconnected	Homogeneity	Multi-cultural
<b>Embarrassment</b>	0	0	0	0
Homogenous group	6	0	—	<b>9</b>
<b>Perceived</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>Negative</b>				
Perceived bias	<b>5</b>	0	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Perceived</b>				
<b>Contradiction</b>	0	0	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>
Perceived Divisive	0	0	0	<b>1</b>
<b>Perceived</b>	0	0	0	<b>1</b>
<b>Isolation</b>				
Perceived lack of diverse interaction	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>perception of falseness</b>	0	0	0	0

Table 8

*Code Co-Occurrence Nodes Part 2*

	Peer-to-Peer Relationship	Community	Connection	Sense of Belonging
<b>Embarrassment</b>	<b>1</b>	0	<b>2</b>	0
Homogenous group	0	0	3	1
<b>Perceived Negative</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>	0	0
Perceived bias	<b>1</b>	0	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Perceived Contradiction</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	0	0
Perceived Divisive	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>	0	0
<b>Perceived Isolation</b>	<b>2</b>	0	0	0
Perceived lack of diverse interaction	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	0
<b>perception of falseness</b>	<b>2</b>	0	<b>0</b>	0

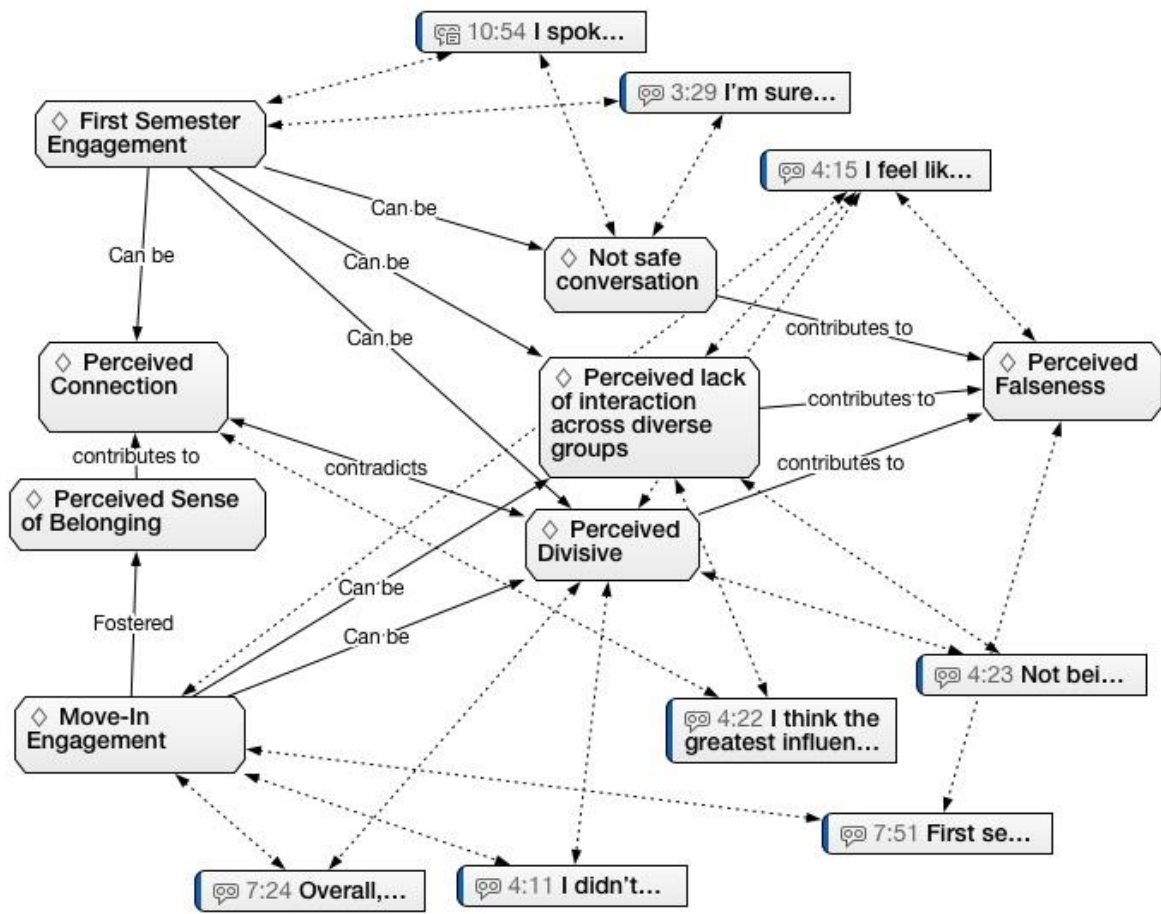


Figure 5. Nodes that contrive to develop a perception of falseness

In quote 10:54 Participant 10, (top center Figure 5) shares about a political science class, in which the professor stopped her from sharing about the Black Lives Matter Movement. She perceived that her side of the discussion was shut down to calm the class and move the conversation away from the Black Lives Matter Movement. Participant 10 perceived this experience to be contradictory to the institutional intent to create safe environs for conversation and to value disparate views points; Participant 10 (April 13, 2017) expressed her perception of the experience,

I spoke out a few times about it [Black Lives Matter Movement] ... and the professor said we had to stop because it wasn't appropriate... Sometimes I feel like my opinion isn't really appreciated in that class, especially in that class (Participant 10, personal communication).

Participant 3 had a similar experience in a core class on Christian World View. There was no room for open questioning, she felt that her agnostic perspective was not valued, in fact, she did not feel safe to share her perspective, "but I feel like there will be backlash if I say what I believe" (Participant 3, personal communication, March 7, 2017). Figure 6 highlights that First Generation students and students a World View that differs from the professor tend to feel unsafe, unless specifically invited into the conversation.

A second example of perceived falseness centers around marketing and recruiting. Some participants were courted through multi-cultural outreach, specifically the visit and early move-in. These programs were designed to communicate a sense of belonging to diverse students, that University XYZ has a racially interconnected student body, and that the university values diversity and inclusion. Indeed, student perceptions revealed many efforts that they interpreted as connective or fostering belonging. However, once students were living within the campus community, they did not perceive the student body to be racially interconnected. The lived experience communicated through interviews was that there were small semi-homogenous groups of diverse students navigating the sea of white students. Participant 4 and Participant 1, both international students, perceived that they were isolated from the greater university community, not what they thought they were getting into. Participant 7 and Participant 10, both expressed that the multi-cultural engagements were the primary point of connection, the reason they chose to attend. Participant 10, now has decided that she will not return for her sophomore



year, because she has not experienced the racially interconnected community that was expected. Participant 10 has not made a connection with the university. Within her small friend group, yes, but outside of that she has experienced little connection and does not feel valued by the larger community. These are but two examples contradiction, where students felt like the university communicated one message but the lived experience differed.

It was also apparent that students did not distinguish between official institutional activities and student led activities. Sponsored clubs and special interest groups appeared to be perceived as institutional. Students acknowledged that the university does not have control over student behavior and did not view contrary student behaviors or attitudes as a contradiction. However, contrary university actions were viewed negatively.

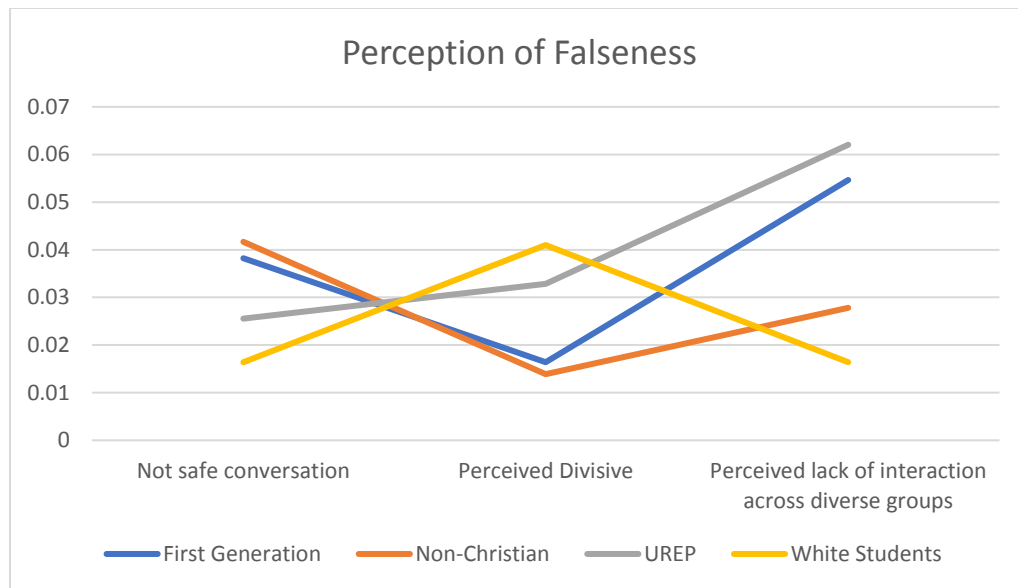
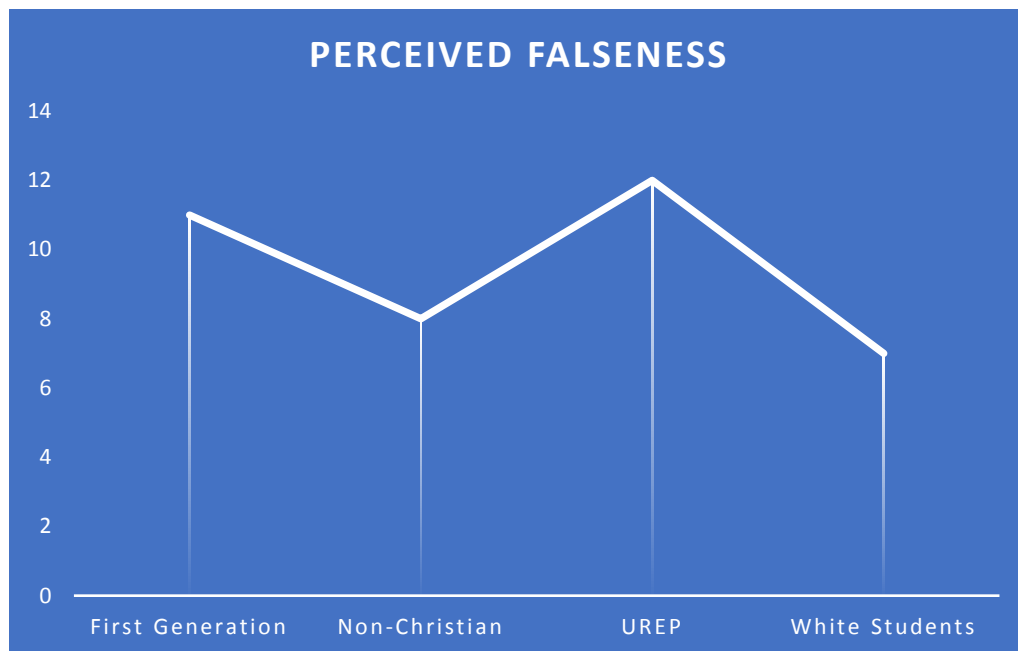


Figure 6. Perception of Falseness



*Figure 7. Perception of Falseness Aggregated*

UREP and first generation students were more likely to identify an experience the was perceived as contradictory to university intentions. UREP students perceive University XYZ to be a white school that invites select UREP students in, ostensibly to add value to the community. UREP students also perceive that they are tolerated within the community; not part of the core fabric of the community. UREP and First Generation students' perception of the transitional year included the observation that there is a lack of interaction across diverse people groups. Students with a strong connection, are not as likely to perceive falseness. Participant 5 (April 4, 2017) views the phenomena in this way:

Even though I want to stay here all 4 years and I couldn't be happier, the fact that not everybody at [University XYZ] thinks that way and there are things about [University XYZ] that they would like to change, ...I think it's good for me to see that. It shows that [University XYZ] isn't for everybody and that's ok (Participant 5, personal communication).

**Structural segregation.** Students perceive that some institutional engagement contributes to structural segregation. Structural segregation occurs in an institution if specific policies or practices contribute to segregation or prevent people groups from intermixing. Student participants described friend groups in language that mirrors the description of affinity groups. Participant 11 portrayed her friend group as all of her nursing major friends, Participant 6 her music friends, and Participant 1 said he shared his friendship with other science majors. All other participants stated that their primary friend group was formed early in the first semester and made up mostly of dorm-mates. While, affinity groupings can be a positive community influence, if said groups were structurally established, it may be perceived as segregation.

Although the prevailing perspective is one of homogeneity within friend groups, not all appear to be homogeneous or segregated. Participant 10 (April 13, 2017) describes her friend group as very diverse, “so two of them from Hawaii, they’re both Filipino. Sheri is White and Okinawan, I don’t even know what that is, ... Margo is Hispanic and then Lynn is White and I’m black” (Participant 10, personal communication). Participant 8 (April 10, 2017) describes her friend group as diverse, “We’re so completely different but we just have this common factor of loving one another... yeah they [my friend group] are [all white]. I’m the only one of mixed culture” (Participant 8, personal communication).

Most friend groups, it appears, are constructed via geographic proximity and most students describe friend groups as homogeneous. Participant 7 (April 6, 2017) described a typical scene on campus, “I’ve noticed is when you walk through the cafeteria... you can see like the ethnic people have a standing group... The only tables I see that are like diverse, is the sports tables” (Participant 7, personnel communication). “Describe my friend group?” says Participant 6 (April 4, 2017), “oh they are all white girls” (Participant 6, personal communication).

Figure Z illustrates nodes that contrive to develop a perception of separation.

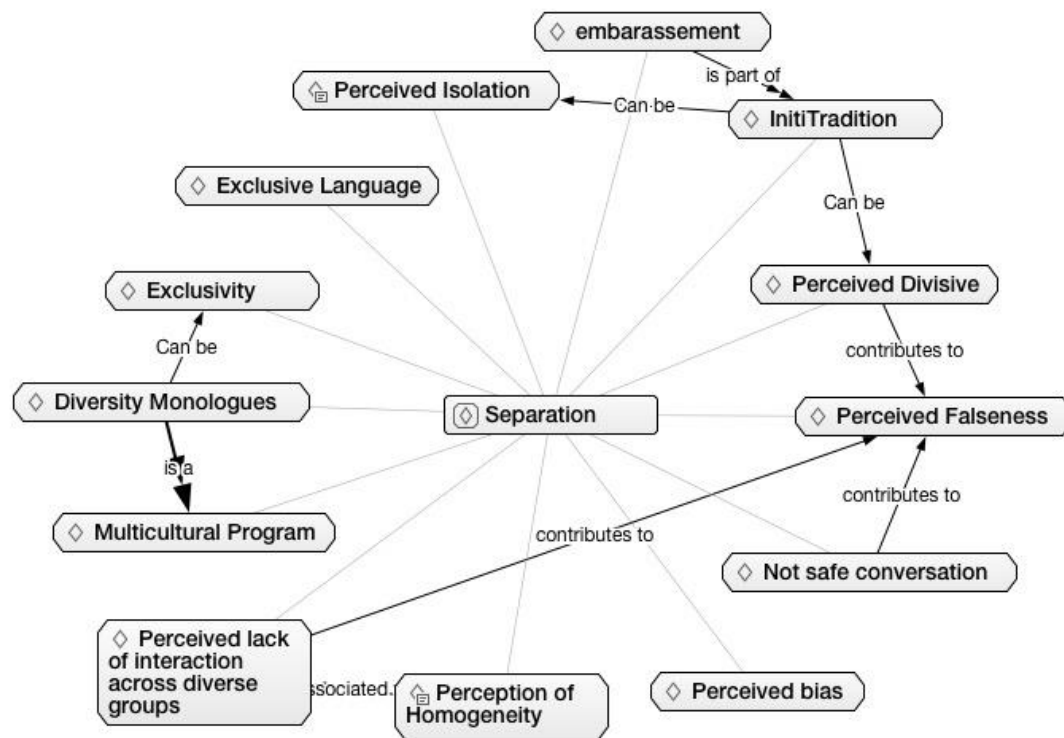


Figure 8. Perception of Separation

Participant 7 (April 6, 2017) says that he does not know why students group up in a homogeneous way, “and you look around and there’s a friend group and they happen to be all brown and another friend group will be all white. That’s something that I like picked up on right away because I saw it so often at my high school and it was just like, still...” (Participant 7, personal communication). Participant 7 ran out of words to express his disappointment that University XYZ wasn’t really different than his public high school. “It’s just weird to me that we all happen to be ethnic, you know what I’m saying? Like colored, I should say” (Participant 7, personal communication).

What then causes this homogeneous grouping? Participant 6 (April 4, 2017) noted that “I would say, outside of my friend group, yes, I think there are parts [of campus life and spaces] where there are different types of cultures or different types of people... but there’s very little

change of the same types of people that I interact with” (Participant 5, personal communication). There is no evidence to suggest that it is the institution’s intent to segregate students, however student perceptions indicate that some institutional engagements might contribute to structural segregation.

Early multi-cultural programs, like Bridges, have been designed to foster a sense of belonging for UREP students. This early connection, helped bind UREP students together in a strong network. International students have a similar early move-in program. Programs like these, that fostered strong connections early in the semester, had an unintended effect of serving as barriers to relationship with the broader campus. Participant 4 (April 4, 2017) described the experience,

I stayed most of the time with the international students because we got to have pre-orientation and we got to be close...I feel like I should have had more of a chance to meet other students—American students and not international students. I feel like maybe there is a problem with that kind of relationship that I should have had (Participant 4, personal communication).

Students described how several engagements exhibit exclusivity. Special interest can be edifying to a community. However, when an engagement appears to encourage exclusivity that is based on race/ethnicity/gender, students perceived the engagement as contributing to structural segregation, thereby having a divisive effect within the community. Interviews revealed that students of race/ethnicity other than African American or White were inclined to use inclusive language. White students and African American students used exclusive language to describe friend groups and make general observations. A group could be perceived as closed for a variety of reasons whether it is the intent of the group or not. If members of a group use exclusive

language the group will be perceived as closed by those outside the group. Note that students perceive student clubs as institutional actors.

Another negative perception noted in interviews sprang forth from a multi-cultural engagement. The event itself, UREP students found to be edifying and affirming. However, neither the participants nor the audience were demographically reflective of the University XYZ community, therefore an unintended consequence of the event was that it served to highlight division and encourage exclusivity and separation. Participant 10's (April 13, 2017) observation of the audience demonstrates an example of exclusive language, "I think it was the most diverse that I've seen X University, honestly, everyone was there" (Participant 10, personal communication). Participant 10's perception of everyone, did not include the majority of students on campus. For some this was perceived as beautiful, "You just look around and see all these different colors and see all these different professors that are there. It was great" (Participant 10, personal communication).

Some students perceived that many white students did not feel welcome to the event, the closed feeling created a perception of exclusivity. Participants 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6 did not comment on the Diversity Monologues, indicating that they did not perceive them to be influential. Participant 2 commented that he felt unwelcome, even though he had some friends that were attending. Participant 7 (April 6, 2017) stated "at the Diversity Monologues—that was really cool. That was affirmative for sure, cause like you saw everyone of color come outside... But like you go back to your dorms and all of the white people are still there" (Participant 7, personal communication). As he tried to explain his disappointment that there was such separation he lamented, "it's just the way people are, I guess" (Participant 7, personal communication).

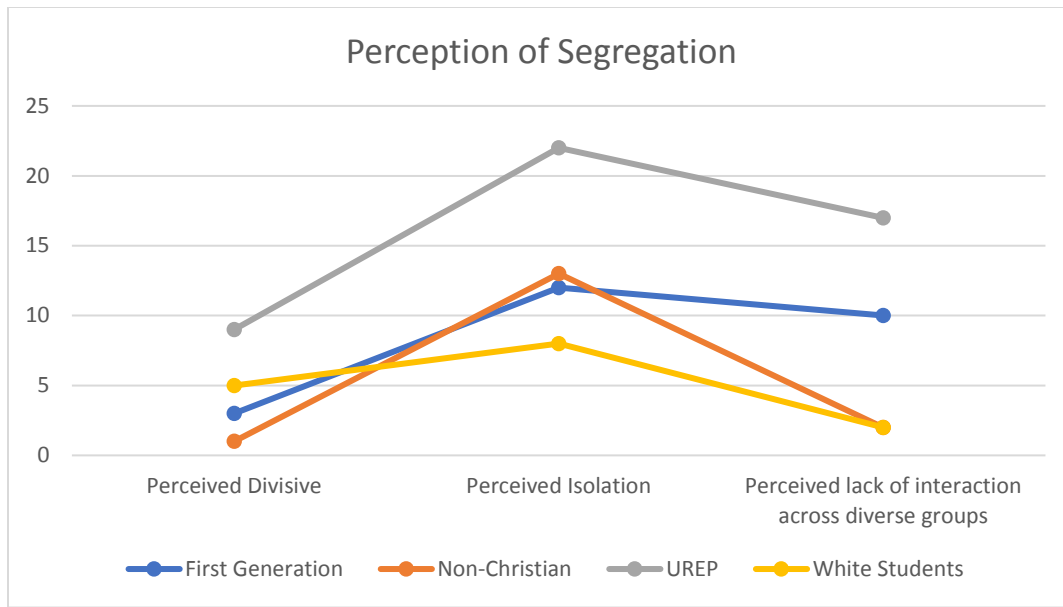


Figure 9. Perception of Segregation

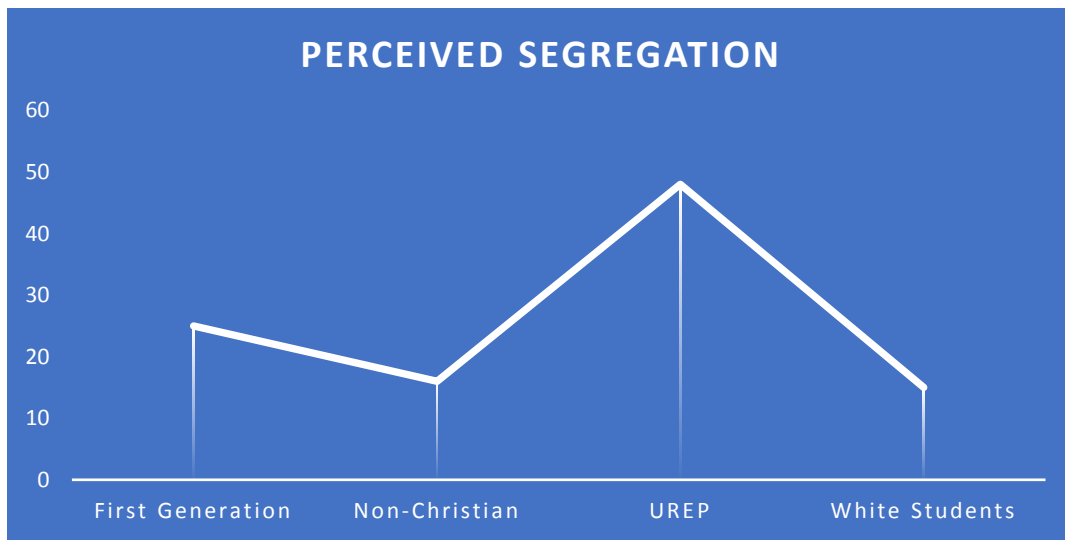


Figure 10. Perceived Segregation Aggregated

Cross case analysis of three of the major contributing factors to the perception of separation, indicate that UREP students have a higher instance of perceived segregation than other sub groups. This data indicates that UREP students perceive themselves as being isolated from the main body of campus culture.

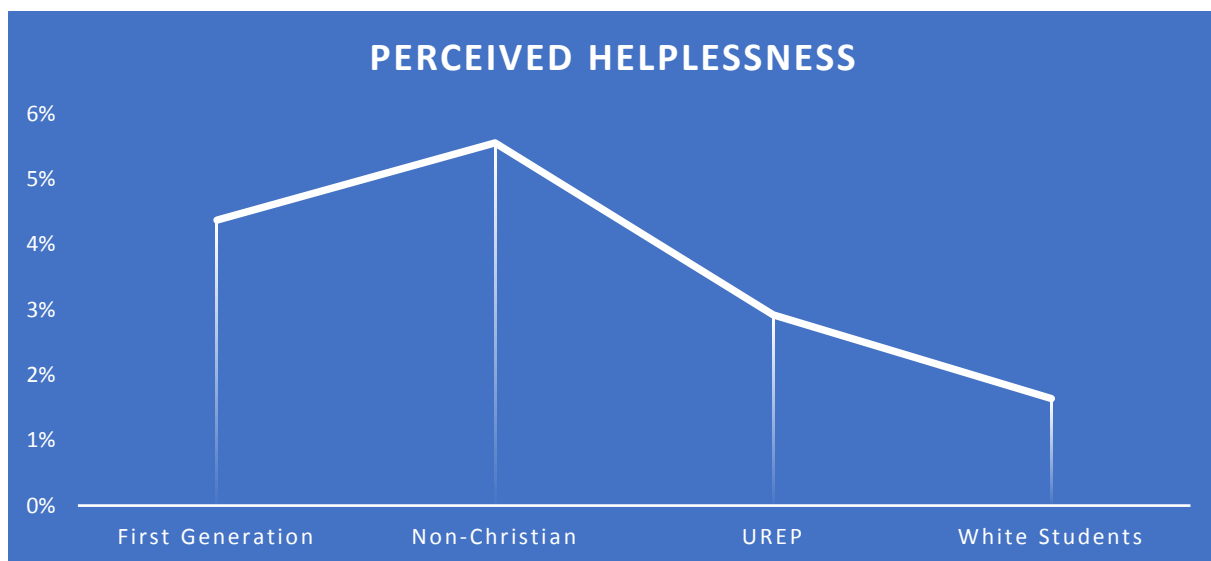
**Perception of helplessness.** Students expressed perceptions of helplessness on two fronts. One was attributional, in that they had been challenged to their personal limit and therefore could not go beyond that point. The second form of perceived helplessness was influential. Students perceived that their personal influence had no value to affect change within the campus community when confronted with prejudice, and bias.

*Attributional helplessness.* Students that experienced academic stress, expressed an attributional mindset. That is that their academic abilities were fixed and that failure in a class meant that they would not be able to major in that area. This mindset means that students were allowing one negative experience to change long held dreams. Participant 3 (March 7, 2017) wanted to major in science but BIO 140 “I just stopped going at a certain point . . . I guess science is not my thing . . . it was very discouraging” (Participant 3, personal communication). Participant 2 (March 7, 2017) had a similar experience “as a freshman, don’t take BIO 140, you’ll kill yourself” (Participant 2, personal communication). Each decided that there was no way to overcome and they gave up. Participant 10 changed her major from Biology to a Social Science, as a reaction to a poor Biology grade. However, now she laments that decision, she will switch back but has “lost a semester of progress” (Participant 10, personal communication, April 13, 2017). Attributional helplessness seems to contribute to a perceived lack of fit and belonging.

Participant 3 (March 7, 2017) did eventually find a place to belong; it was in a Gender Studies program. Here she felt affirmed, and capable. Participant 2 (March 7, 2017), as he continues to struggle academically, states that he still does not think he belongs at University XYZ. Participant 10 (April 13, 2017) is planning to find a place to belong at another university next fall, citing academic and social reasons for her decision to leave.



***Influential helplessness.*** Students perceive that prejudicial behaviors are just part of life. Students that experienced bias or prejudicial behaviors, dealt with it, but essentially shrugged it off with the attitude that it is just the way things are. “I’ve only had like two-three run ins with people that are like semi-racist... but that’s not a lot... but when you’re actually living it, three is not a lot” (Participant 10, personal communication, April 13, 2017). Participant 10 shared conversation about seven different instances of perceived bias, in the end discounting or slighting some cases to arrive at two or three. Participant 7 (April 6, 2017), reflecting about prejudicial behaviors, shared that some are just unavoidable “it’s an unspoken boundary that you still see out there... no matter where you go that’s the way it is” (Participant 7, personal communication). All students within the study experienced or witnessed some sort of prejudicial behavior during the first semester, white students experienced or witnessed it at about one-half the rate of UREP students.



*Figure 11.* Perceived Helplessness

When Participant 6 (April 4, 2017) was putting up pictures of friends from home, her roommate commented “oh you were friends with a lot of Asians back home” (Participant 6, personal communication). Thinking that her new best friend had internal racial bias was unnerving, “I don’t think they really meant it in a way that was racist but it was something that really shocked me” (Participant 6, personal communication). Participant 6 chose to ignore the comment and left it dangling. Eight of eleven participants shared stories of prejudicial actions or words that went uncontested because they felt that there was nothing that could be done.

### **Summary**

Data gathered through open interviews with 11 traditional freshmen shed light on freshman perception of engagement strategies. Freshmen reflected on the experience of the transitional year, considering institutional engagement, campus culture, and peer relationships. The data revealed 120 codes that were condensed into 80 codes that served to describe the lived experience of the transitional year. Those codes coalesced into four major themes that are highlighted as findings:

1. Authentic engagement produces a sense of connection. Student perception of connection is fostered when students perceive authentic institution-to-student relationship.
2. Engagement that contradicts reality produces mistrust. Student perception of falseness results when students identify a lack of integrity between institutional intent and the lived experience.
3. Engagement that targets a specific group leads to a perception of structural segregation. Student’s perception of separation is attributable, in part, to perceived structural segregation.

4. Students tend to be circumstantially constrained. Student's expressed a perception of helplessness, attributional helplessness served to limit dreams and influential helplessness prevented students from seeing a possibility of being a change agent.

Within these four findings students revealed how they perceived institutional engagement and perceived influences on resiliency. Connection, it appears, is crucial to resiliency.

Connection is also fragile. Connection takes sustained authentic relationship for growth, however it can be destroyed by one perceived contradiction. Experiences that run counter to that which is advertised are perceived as false and contribute negatively to resiliency. The peer-to-peer community appears to have great power to influence students, yet in some cases students perceive influential helplessness. Organically occurring engagements carry great power and should not be left to chance. Structured groups serve, at least in the perception of students, to be divisive in nature; having the effect of segregating the community.

Chapter 5 draws conclusions as applied in the institutional context. Additionally, Chapter 5 contains further discussion of results in light of current research, limitations, and implications for practice. It concludes with a presentation of emergent questions and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Results**

### **Introduction**

Chapter 5 provides an introduction and a restatement of the purpose for this study. A general discussion of the results then follows, along with inferences made from the research findings. The chapter continues with the significant of the research to educational leaders, and recommendations for future research. The chapter summary presents a dream, student perception of what University XYZ culture could be, and a thought about what that might mean.

Existing literature revealed that the transition from high school to college is a complex interweaving of internal motivations and external influences (Lenz et al., 2013; Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012; Permzadian & Credé, 2015; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1987). Institutional engagement strategies have been employed in efforts to exert a positive influence over transitioning students. However, higher education's traditional engagement and transitional programming does not always engender connection nor promote academic success. This study explored student perceptions of institutional engagement, to understand how students perceive an institution and why institution-to-student connection is important in the educative process.

This study employed a case study design incorporating in-depth interviews to gain insights into the freshman social environment. Interviews served to uncover how institutional strategies affect students' resiliency and why some students perceive institutional engagement strategies as connective while others view the same strategies as divisive. A holistic analysis of the case study data served to paint a picture of the freshman transitional experience for the cohort. Embedded cases gave independent voice to myriad diverse sub-groups within the population and offered the opportunity for cross-case analysis, thus leading to a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Babbie, 2013; Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014).

## Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Literature

Four findings emerged from the analysis of student shared perceptions of the transitional year. As institutions, faculty, and staff consider the results of this study it will be necessary to translate findings into institutionally actionable ideas.

1. Authentic Engagement.
2. Contradictory Engagement.
3. Differentiated Engagement.
4. Circumstantially Constrained.

**Authentic engagement.** Interviews revealed that students valued both peer-to-peer connection and institution-to-student connection. This validates the importance of connection, consistent with Jacob and Archie's (2008) findings. Student perception of connection is fostered when students perceive authentic institution-to-student relationship. Interviews sustain Lenz, Holman, Lancaster, and Gotay's (2013) supposition that RCT is appropriate for broad application to all college students. Institution-to-student connection begins with first contact and is fostered through both virtual and face-to-face contacts leading up to move-in. Students identified their relationship with their advisor to be the most impactful. Students identified peer-to-peer relationships to be important as well. This supports Corwin & Cintron's (2011) findings that institutions should focus on supporting relational groups rather than transforming individuals.

Peer-to-peer connections are intentionally fostered through the orientation process, although some students view this as contrived and therefore inauthentic. Data revealed that student-selected friend groups were generally racially homogeneous. Most described friend groups as dorm-mates, although some stated that they were closer to friends that shared their

major. Friend groups that were based on common interests or like majors, such as nursing or music, transcended racial/ethnic boundaries. These groups have common slang, group rituals, and exclusive language much like a racially or ethnically based friend group, confirming Venuelo and Salvatory's (2016) posit that cultural behavior is not restricted to racial/ethnic based groups. Students perceive friend groups as essentially closed, it is very difficult to transition between friend groups.

Students need to be prepared for both benefits and challenges of peer-to-peer relationships. Even participants that had a negative roommate experience recognized the power that such a relationship carried. Student perceptions were consistent with Adams's (2012) observation that students must be prepared for the social or non-cognitive demands of the transition to college life. Adams (2012) research revealed that while cognitive factors influenced a student's resiliency, socio-cultural factors had a greater impact. Students that struggled academically reported that peer support was of paramount import.

**Contradictory engagement.** Student perception of falseness results when students identify a lack of integrity between communicated institutional intent and the lived experience. This perceived falseness leads to long term divisiveness and is detrimental to retention and resiliency. Students identified three areas of concern. The first was general education (GE) classes. Students perceive some GE courses as a hurdle to the true educative process. Communications with both advisors and professors led students to believe that GE classes are not important credits, any class that fits the requirement would do to check the box. When students do not perceive credits to be valuable for personal growth, or in some way valuable to the community there is little motivation to complete. Accomplishing these perceived "box check credits" is counter-productive to the educative process. This is indicative of what Hickinbottom-

Braun and Burns (2015) warned. When market-place practices drive curriculum selection inappropriate curriculum and institutional motivations may be leading higher education away from its traditional purpose. This line of thinking diminishes the value of the educational journey and leads the student, to consider the degree strictly as a necessary burden, a means to an end.

The second example of an engagement that was perceived as false was reported primarily by UREP students. It surfaced when the lived experience did not fit with the expectation levied in the recruitment process. Recruitment efforts led UREP students to believe that they would be living in a racial/ethnically interconnected community. Despite institutional engagement, UREP students expressed a perception of being outside the culture of University XYZ, consistent with Castro's (2012) findings. The perception of the lived experience was not an interconnected community. This perceived lack of racial/ethnic interconnection in the broad campus community left students dismayed. Multi-cultural visit programs, and bridging programs essentially painted an idealistic picture of the campus community. When students experienced the day-to-day culture the contradiction was obvious. This inconsistency created a perception of institutionally designed segregation.

A third example occurred in the move-in phase in the context of orientation. Students perceived Inititradition, a component of orientation designed to foster school spirit, dorm identity, and peer-to-peer relationship, as a negative experience. Interviews revealed that students perceive these activities as puerile and wasted time. Students selectively participated or avoided participation all together. Students that did participate reported that the fatigue factor negatively impacted the start of the academic semester.

These three examples of perceived falseness serve to confirm Dika and D'Amico (2016), assertion that institutional transition programs (traditions, engagement strategies, success

programs, and school culture) intended for connection may actually create a divisive or unwelcoming perception in the minds of traditional freshmen students. Unintended consequences are often difficult to spot and may seem unrelated to the good institutional work that is being done. Systemic broad consideration of transitional engagement in a global context could serve to identify such consequences and create an opportunity to change processes appropriately.

**Differentiated engagement.** Interviews revealed that the unintended consequence of targeted or differentiated engagement is separation, eventually leading to student's perception of purposive structural segregation. Student perceptions confirmed that University XYZ exhibits a social structure similar to the problematic social structure that Benn (2002) and Baber (2012) described, a community that consists of separate people groups simply existing within the same space.

While research indicates that differentiated engagement strategies could engender freshmen persistence across cultural, socio-economic, student interest, and gender divides (Baber, 2012; Dika & D'Amico, 2016; Duggan & Williams, 2011; Rigali-Oiler & Kurpius, 2013), such engagements can be divisive. Students perceived that some existing engagements served to highlight and perhaps even widen the divide between UREP and white students. This perception was prevalent within interviews from UREP and white participants alike. Benn (2002) and Baber (2012) both described processes of enculturation, identifying shortfalls of the attempt to enculturate diverse learners into an institutional culture. Student interviews identified a desire to fit into the learning community, but none of the students indicated a desire to conform in order to fit in. Student perceptions lead one to think about a plant graft. The process of grafting allows the grafted plant to keep its very nature, while it supports the trunk through



photosynthesis, the graft draws its very life from the trunk. Differentiated engagements should be designed around developing these kinds of symbiotic relationships.

**Circumstantially constrained.** Student's expressed a perception of helplessness in two forms. Attributional helplessness served to limit dreams and academic possibilities. Influential helplessness prevented students from seeing a possibility that they could be an instrument of local change. Participant mindsets appear to be reflective of Castro's (2016) observation that millennial students tend to lack grit, in terms of both academic and social challenges.

Perceptions were consistent with Dika and D'Amico's (2016) research that early academic success may increase retention, or at least contribute positively to resiliency. Early academic success appears to be an important factor in promoting institution-to-student connection thereby, bolstering grit and establishing fit and belonging. Helping students overcome academic barriers can lead to empowerment and a change in attributional mindset. Students that were struggling academically, seemed to have a more difficult time finding a place to fit, supporting, Dika and D'Amico (2016) finding that fostering academic or social fit led to increased retention. This does not appear to be related to academic support to conquer a single particularly hard class. Rather, students remarked more powerfully about finding the right program or major and academically fitting into the university. Students that perceived they were misplaced within a major did not perceive institutional fit. Another expression of this phenomena, confirms Aruguete and Hardy's (2016) observation that some students feel cognitive attributes are fixed and therefore that they have no individual control over their own educational outcomes, thus leading to academic paralysis. Further, it appears that this sort of paralysis extends beyond academics to the socio-communal aspects of university life.

Student perceptions indicated that social connections played a role in both fit and resiliency. Students recognized that they themselves are transformed by experiences, consistent with Baber's (2012) assertion that a student's identity is not fixed rather it is transformed by the lived cultural experience. However, influential helplessness manifests itself in the fact that students perceived themselves to be ineffective as transformation agents within the university community, particularly with respect to peer's attitudes. Students' attitudes toward bias and prejudicial behaviors were reflective of Castro's (2012) observation that millennial students value multi-culturalism yet lack awareness of issues surrounding diversity and inclusion. Student behaviors and relationships reflected the chasm and separation that is currently evident in the greater society. All participants, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender appear to be concerned about equity and equality, but expressed acquiescence, and felt relatively powerless to affect even local change.

### **Discussion of the Results**

This study was framed to answer two research questions.

1. RQ 1: How do freshmen students perceive institutional engagement strategies?
2. RQ 2: Why does connection (institutional fit) play a role in a student's resolve to persist in higher education?

**Research question 1.** How do freshmen students perceive institutional engagement strategies? Current college students are savvy consumers. Creative marketing, the emergence and growth of For Profit Universities has led students to shop more aggressively for value in higher education. Students pay attention to institutional engagements, and rely on institutional integrity. Some engagements were viewed in a positive light as they occurred only to have them be the genesis for divisive perceptions later.

Current college students are loyalists, there is a perceived need to belong to something bigger than oneself. Students are looking for fit and belonging, not conformity. Institutional integrity is imperative. Students will perceive inconsistencies.

What appears to be important is consistency throughout the institution-to-student relationship. Students are intuitive, and able to identify when something is valuable, to themselves or to the institution, and when something is a hoop to jump through with no value other than one has to get through it. Students do not want to waste time or money to simply jump through a hoop.

**Research question 2.** Why does connection (institutional fit) play a role in a student's resolve to persist in higher education? It would appear that connection is the primary influence to a positive attitude toward the educational experience. That positive attitude permeates academic efforts, peer-to-peer relationships, and extracurricular involvement, all of which have been shown to be positive contributors to resiliency. That connection takes on many forms, athletic teams, music ensembles, faculty and advisors, academic peers, clubs, service groups, and friend groups. Some of these are directly the product of institutional engagements, some are byproducts of living in community, and some are generated by the students themselves. Regardless of the source, perceived connection and sense of belonging were identified as premier influences to resiliency. Students that do not experience institution-to-student connection indicated more perceptions of contradiction and falseness. Some viewed the educative process as a necessary evil on the way to becoming, or as something to be endured. Students who were still struggling with institutional fit indicated that there is a high probability that they will not return for their sophomore year.

## **Limitations**

Available resources and time limited the study to a single case, providing but a snap shot of student perceptions. The study was conducted at one mid-sized private institution; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to other institutions. However, the study does possess transferability. Descriptive information was provided so educational leaders can determine transferability of results to a specific college or university. The study was limited to the perception of continuing second semester freshman, it represents only that positive perspective, that belongs to those that persisted. The study was conducted from the perspective that this university intends to grow, a distinctive interconnected community of diverse learners.

## **Implication of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory**

The results of this case study provided insight into how participants perceived institutional engagement throughout the transitional period. The study supplied meaningful understanding regarding how students perceive institutional culture and intentions. Conventional engagement has improved retention, but has not necessarily improved the educational experience, social connection, or challenged societal diversity and inclusion norms of behavior. UREP students expressed similar perceptions to those expressed in studies 10 and 20 years ago.

Students expressed differing perspectives of engagements. The knowledge gained from this study may assist with the further development of engagement strategies, supports, and interventions, that can be systemically implemented to increase early academic success, increase institution-to-student and peer-to-peer connection, and improve campus wide racial/ethnic interconnection. Development of effective engagement strategies and properly sequencing said strategies throughout the transitional year, may better position students to take full advantage of the educational opportunity and serve to reduce or remove the persistent challenges faced by

UREP students. With a better understanding of how students perceive institutional engagement, and why connection is important to resilience; educational leaders are well poised to craft institutions of the future. Higher educational leaders should consider the following recommendations:

1. Reduce or redesign demographically targeted early-move-in programs in favor of adding a more robust move-in strategy that includes the full cross section of the campus community.
  - a. Establish a class-wide, racially/ethnically interconnected community first, then follow with differentiated engagement to support sub-group needs.
  - b. Use challenging activities or service projects to push students beyond personal comfort zones and to engender positive interdependence within the freshman class.
  - c. Eliminate embarrassment as a means of pushing students beyond personal comfort zones.
2. Campus visit engagements should include a representative cross section of student demographics to more closely reflect the expected experience of the first semester.
3. Consider revamping general education coursework in light of University mission.
  - a. First semester course work should be purposefully selected to be valuable to the student, improve scholarly engagement throughout college career, and lead to early academic success.
  - b. GE requirements should be purposefully aligned with institutional mission and vision.

- c. Graduation requirements should be outcome focused rather than driven by the accumulation of credits.
- 4. Reconsider diversity and inclusion practices in light of institutional mission. Past attempts to positively influence diversity and inclusion, largely structural integrative models, have left UREP students with persistent challenges.
  - a. It might be possible for small to medium sized universities to construct a mission and vision centered culture that transcends the racial/ethnic norms of the greater society thereby developing an extra-ordinarily interconnected community.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Future studies in freshman success should look beyond mere retention, the future of traditional higher educational institutions depends upon developing educative processes that meet the needs of current and future students while meeting the goal of educating community leaders and global thinkers. A mixed methods study of research scientists, employers, political leaders, and community leaders could shed light on important characteristics and attributes of future leaders. This knowledge could help structure higher education institutions that will lead into the next millennium.

As noted in the limitations, the current study provides but a snapshot, a picture of the perceptions of current students. The study does not purport to be evaluative in nature. A mixed-methods longitudinal study following a cohort through the university experience would more deeply unpack the effectiveness of engagement strategies as well as chart how student perceptions change as one matures through four years of university.

Current diversity and inclusion practices start from the perspective of highlighting differences, noting inequities, and making up for past injustices. Beginning from this perspective, has proven to be of limited value in moving the diversity and inclusion needle. Dika and D’Amico (2016) note that UREP students face “unique and persistent challenges” (p.369). Those same challenges were present at the turn of the century as noted in Benn’s (2002) study. Further qualitative study of communities built on positive interdependence and mutual accountability could shed light on a transformative mindset for racial/ethnic interconnectedness. Faith based institutions may be well poised to lead in this area. Implementing a biblical perspective of impartiality may make it possible for such a transformation.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative case study explored the freshman perceptions of institutional engagement during the transitional year, starting with acceptance and concluding with the end of first semester. A semi-structured interview encouraged each participant to tell his or her story, thereby highlighting the institutional engagements that truly influenced the student’s journey. The study revealed four themes, that may produce actionable goals for higher education leaders.

1. Authentic engagement produces a sense of connection.
2. Engagement that contradicts reality produces mistrust.
3. Engagement that targets a specific group leads to a perception of structural segregation.
4. Students tend to be circumstantially constrained.

These four themes function interdependently to weave the tapestry of the transitional experience.

This study supports Lenz et al.’s (2013) views on relational cultural theory, as applicable to all college students. Relationship, institution-to-student and peer-to-peer, appears to be the

primary factor that influences a student's desire and ability to persist in higher education. Relationships foster connection, and connection fosters fit or belonging. Consistent with Spady's (1971) theory of separation, students that experienced either academic or social stress were tempted to give up and drop out. However, relationships provided the strength to overcome that temptation and persist. An atmosphere conducive to a successful transition can be enhanced with purposeful engagement strategies that are sequenced to move students through the transition and into a connected learning community.

It appears that diversity and inclusion is a major theme that impacts engagement across all facets of the learning community. Current engagements have led to a student perception of the learning community as small groups of diverse students navigating through a sea of white students. Participant 6 (April 4, 2017) offered a picture of what the learning community might look like if students genuinely valued one another. "It would look really diverse, it would be just everyone with everyone. It wouldn't be cliquey, ... that's what I think" (Participant 6, personal communication). If universities intend to grow learning communities built upon relationships that go beyond toleration to valuing, institutional engagement ought to be centered on interdependence and community interconnectedness.

Some areas of improvements were identified in the social and academic environment. Current college students respond to authentic relationships. Guidance and mentorship is only effective once a relationship is established. Perceived contradictions damage relationships. Current college students are collaborative, creative, and innovative, not prone to conform. Properly sequenced engagements can foster relationships and cultivate fit or belonging, grafting students into the community. A graft is appropriate because once grafted into the community students form a symbiotic relationship with the institution. This allows for the student to



maintain his or her identity and yet be part of something bigger, that is the learning community, the institution. It is this type of positive interdependence that will serve to grow both student and institution.

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## **Appendix A: Research Guide**

1. Develop rapport: understand the interviewee
2. Listen to the story: details the freshman transitional experience
3. Create opportunity for the interviewee to process the story: reflect on meaning

### **Research Questions**

- RQ 1: Why do some students perceive institutional engagement strategies as connective while others view the same strategies as divisive?
- RQ 2: Why does connection (institutional fit) play a role in a student's resolve to persist in higher education?

### **Interview Protocol**

1. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.
2. Introduce myself, what I am studying and why I have asked them for an interview.
3. Make sure that the student is classified as a second semester freshman.
4. Emphasize the assurance of confidentiality, and ask that they not discuss this interview until notified by email that the study is complete.
5. Establish a safe setting by giving permission to the student, he/she should only respond to questions he/she is comfortable answering.
6. Review the consent form. Ask the student to sign the form.
7. Inform the student that I will be recording the interview and taking notes.
8. Tell the student that I'm going to ask about three categories of transition. Briefly discuss each category and then proceed with the format below.
9. Let them know when they will receive an email from me once the study is complete.

## **Interview Guide**

I am studying the freshman transitional experience. You were in high school and now you are in college, past your first semester. As faculty, here, I have my own perception of your experience, in fact I have studied a great deal of research that has gone into helping Universities understand the freshman transition and thereby establish strategies that are designed to help with that transition. But I am removed from your actual experience.

What I want to know is your perception of the first semester experience, the ups and downs, difficulties and triumphs. I want to know where your expectations were met with satisfaction or perhaps disappointment. Were there surprises along the way, and how did those surprises influence your persistence?

With that in mind I have separated this interview into three categories, just to guide the discussion, my questions are meant to get you started but feel free simply tell me your story.

### **Application/Admission Decision**

Think about your first encounter with University XYZ . . . something or someone influenced you to apply and ultimately accept the offer of admission . . . can you tell me about your journey.

#### **Potential probing questions:**

- Were there other Universities that you were considering? What was the deciding factor?
- What and/or who influenced you to apply to University XYZ?
- What and/or who most influenced your decision to come to University XYZ?
- What impressions and expectations did you have about college/University XYZ before you came?

### **First Semester Experiences**

Think about your impressions as you first arrived, move in day, first week activities, first classes and eventually finals. Tell me about your journey from arrival through to first semester finals.

#### **Potential probing questions:**

- Do you feel you were successful during your first semester?
  - Why?
- What contributed to that feeling of success?
- Can you share any challenging or difficult experiences from your first semester?
- So what made you stick with it to the second semester?
- Were or are there any programs, events that you find off-putting?
- What most contributed to your success during your first semester?
- Did your first semester at University XYZ meet your pre-entry/college expectations?
  - If so, who or what? If not, why?

### **Campus Culture/Community**

Think about your relationships with peers, faculty, staff, clubs or other activities with which you are involved . . . Can you tell me about your life on campus, relationships, places you like to hang out or where/when feel comfortable or safe?

#### **Potential probing questions:**

- Have you experienced any biased or prejudicial actions or words?
  - Racial/ethnic motivated,
  - Gender motivated,
  - Spiritual or religiously motivated?
- How have you felt affirmed or supported?
  - Racial/ethnic identity,
  - Spiritual or religious identity
- Who or what did you feel most connected to during your first year?
- Do you feel comfortable in classes, talking to faculty, in your residence halls, in organizations, etc?
- What are you nervous or anxious about?
- Where/when do you feel most comfortable and connected, or where/when do you feel uncomfortable or disconnected?
  - Can you identify what makes you feel disconnected?
- Why do you feel safe to be yourself when you are at . . . but not when . . .

#### **Closing questions**

Why did you persist to your second semester?

Reflecting on the whole of the first semester experience what had the greatest positive influence on your desire to persist? Biggest negative?

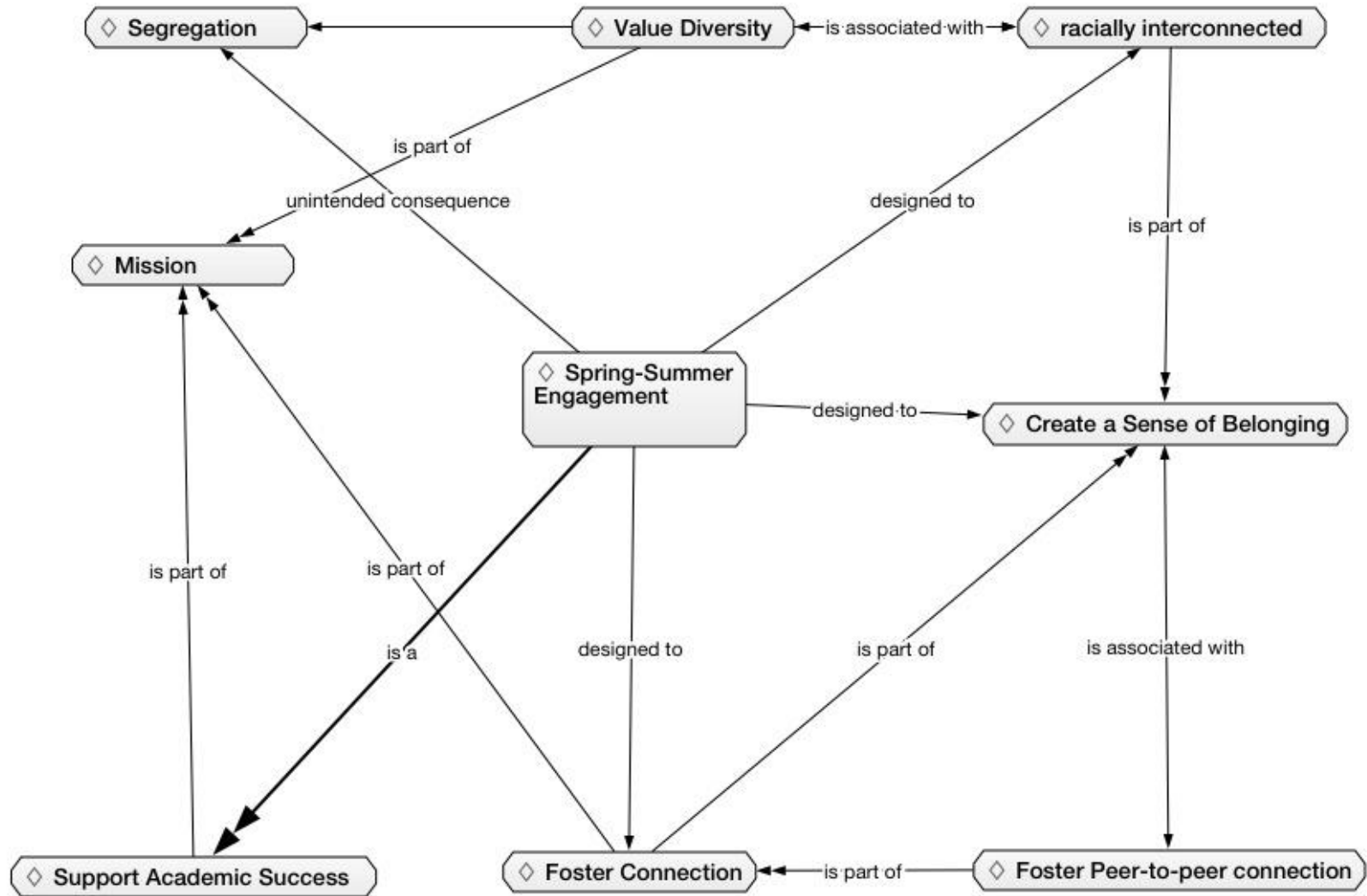
Do you have anything that you would like add that would help me understand your transition and the journey of your first semester here at University W?

Do you have any questions for me?

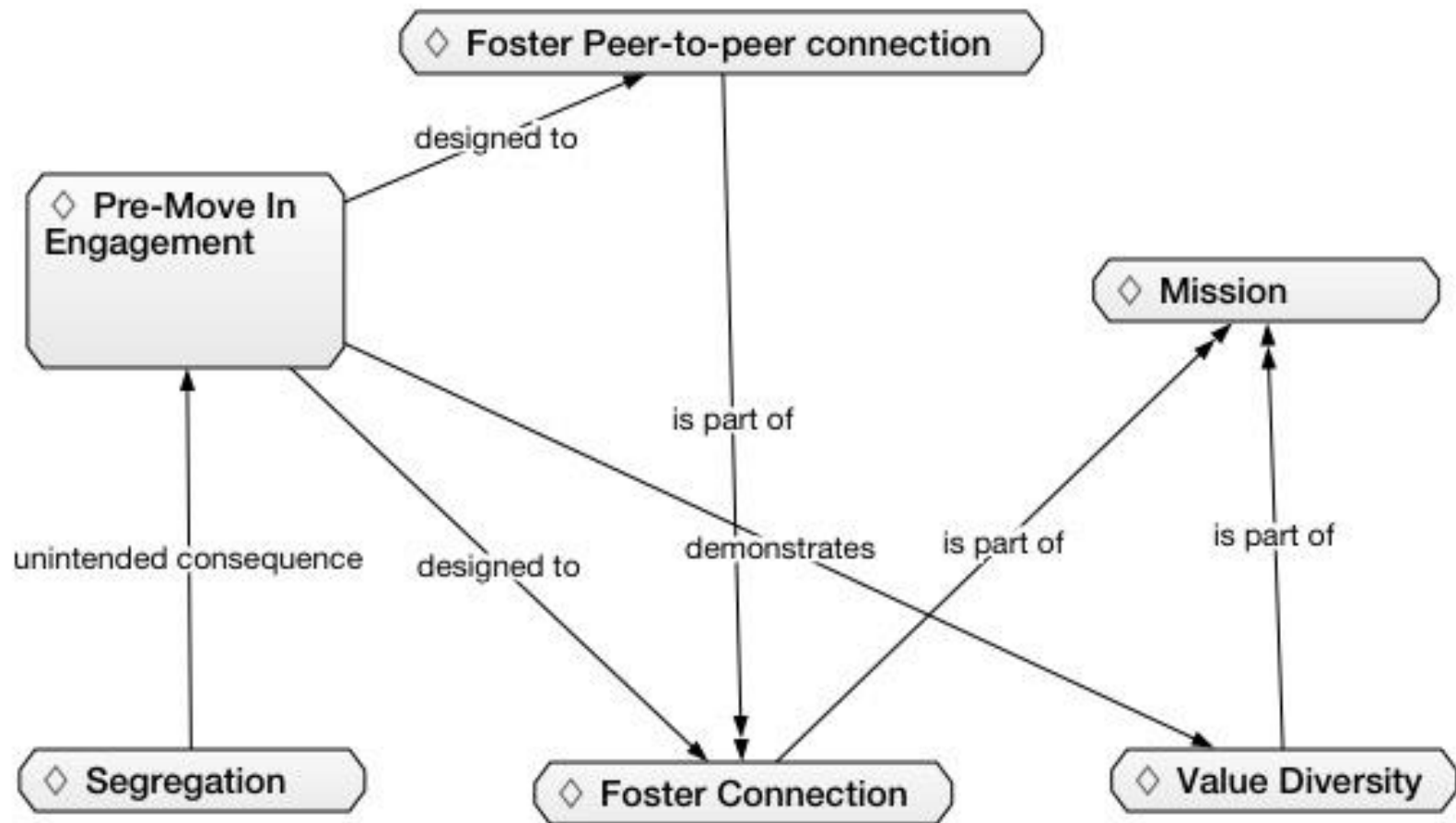
## Appendix B: Institutional Code Networks

### *Institutional Code Co-occurrence*

	Spring-Summer Engagement	Move-In Engagement	First Semester Engagement
Create a Sense of Belonging	2	19	2
<b>Create a Sense of Community</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>3</b>
Create Opportunity for Access	0	5	0
<b>Develop a world view</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7</b>
Faith integration	0	2	4
<b>Foster Connection</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>5</b>
Foster Faculty-to-Student relationship	2	4	3
<b>Foster Peer-to-peer connection</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>1</b>
Foster Staff-to-Student Relationship	0	2	0
<b>Racially interconnected</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
Safe Conversation	0	3	11
<b>Segregation</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>
Support Academic Success	8	6	13
<b>Value Diversity</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5</b>

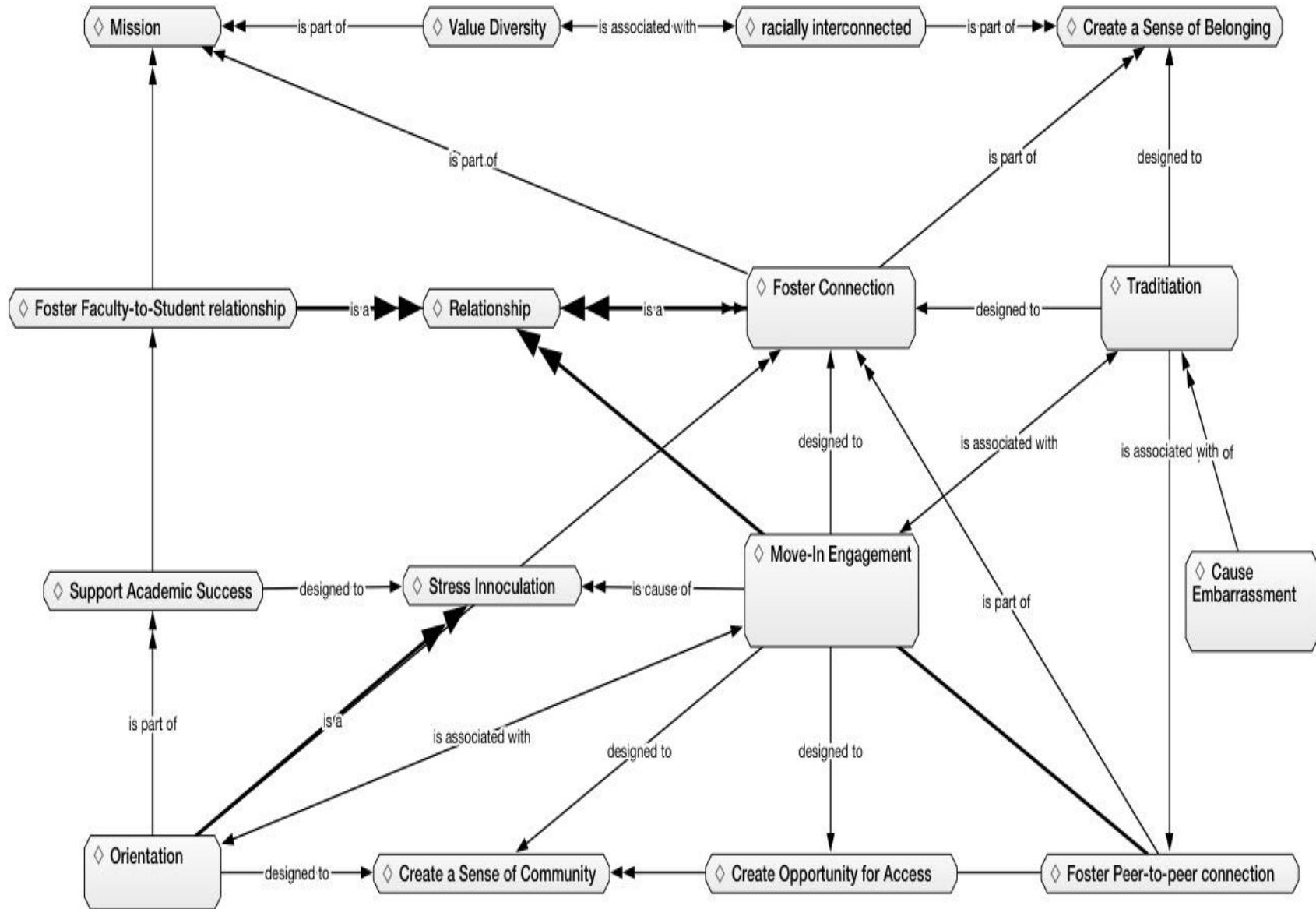


Network 1. Spring/Summer Engagement Code Network

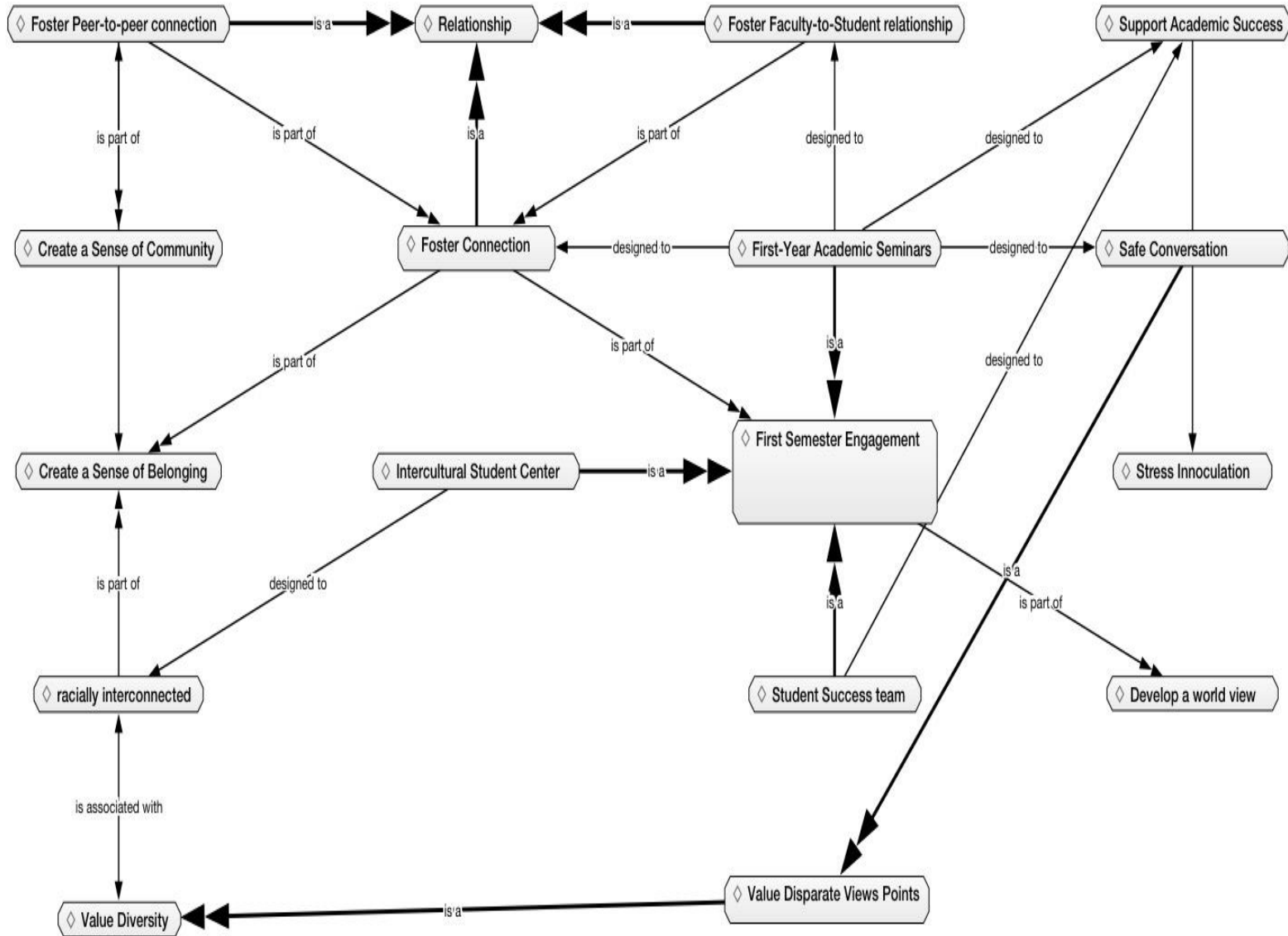


Network 2. Pre-Move-in Engagement Code Network





Network 3. Move-In Engagement Code Network



Network 4. First Semester Engagement Code Network

## Appendix C: Statement of Original Work

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University-Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*.

Donald J Comi

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Digital Signature

Donald J Comi

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Name (Typed)

27 July 2017

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Date